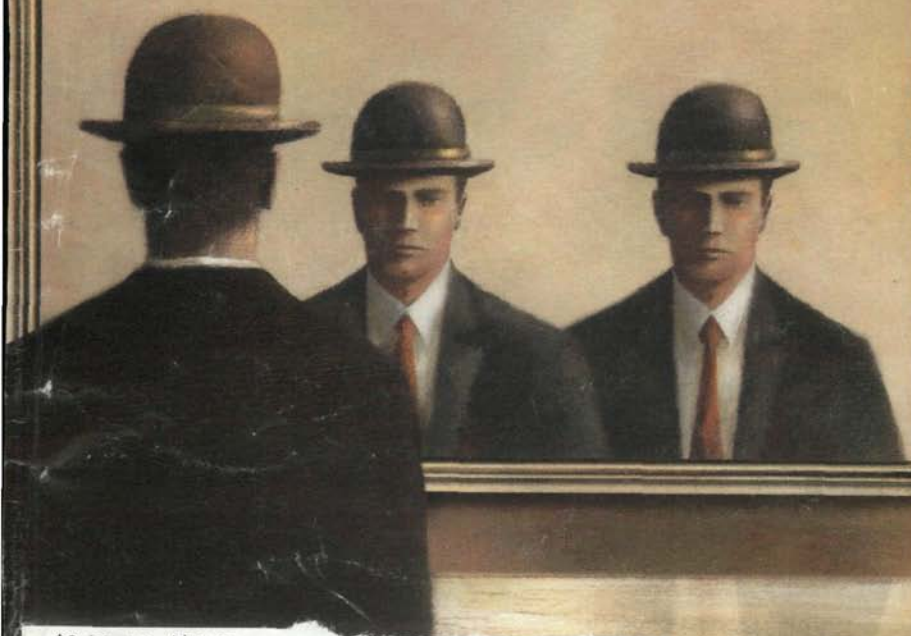


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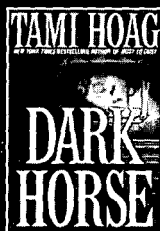
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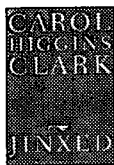
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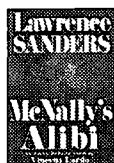
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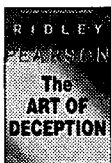
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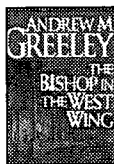
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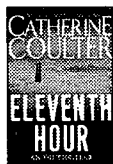
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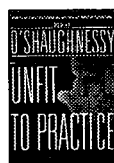
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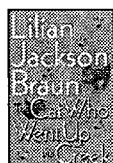
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# CONTENTS



## SHORT STORIES

<b>FINE BUSINESS</b> by Jas. R. Petrin	<b>6</b>
<b>THE TWINS: A MYSTERY</b> by Joyce Carol Oates	<b>28</b>
<b>SAINT MAFFIA AND SOUTH CRAMPTON</b> by I. J. Schechter	<b>39</b>
<b>BAD, GOOD, AND NO LUCK</b> by Ben Satterfield	<b>66</b>
<b>THE BOND MARKET</b> by R. T. Lawton	<b>100</b>
<b>NUDE WITH SNOW GEESE</b> by Eve Fisher	<b>114</b>
<b>LOVE OUR LAKE</b> by William T. Lowe	<b>120</b>

## MYSTERY CLASSIC

<b>THE GORGON'S HEAD</b> by Gertrude Bacon	<b>127</b>
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## DEPARTMENTS

<b>EDITOR'S NOTES</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>UNSOLVED</b> by Robert Kesling	<b>97</b>
<b>SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED"</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>BOOKED &amp; PRINTED</b> by Mary Cannon	<b>137</b>
<b>THE STORY THAT WON</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>INDEX</b>	<b>140</b>

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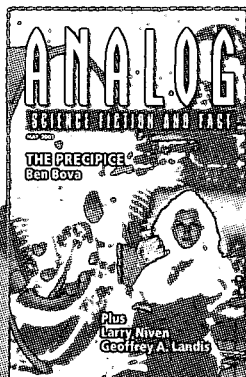
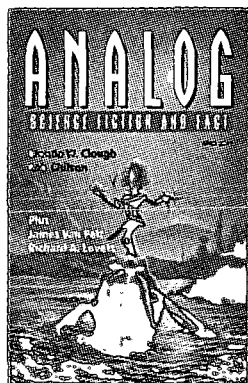
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

Linda Landrigan

**W**e welcome to our pages this month I. J. Schecter, author of "Saint Maffia and South Crampton." A native of Toronto, Mr. Schecter credits *Mad Magazine* and *Archie* comics for sparking his desire to write. His short story collection, *The Bottom of the Mug*, was published in 1998.

AHMM has a long history of showcasing talented writers—this month marks our forty-sixth year of continuous publication. We know that many of our readers save every copy and frequently refer back to old issues for a memorable story or the first appearance of a favorite writer. To make this easier, in this issue we are introducing a new annual feature, an index of the year's stories and articles, listed alphabetically by author, with the month and page num-



I. J. Schecter

Photo by David Leyes

ber of each publication.

With Halloween and Thanksgiving on the near horizon, we hope to quicken your spirits with a hearty mix of creepy, funny, and hard-boiled American stories, including a haunting tale by Joyce Carol Oates that will challenge your notion of identity. A menacing ham radio operator in Canada . . . Financial shenanigans . . . Artistic mayhem? You got it.

---

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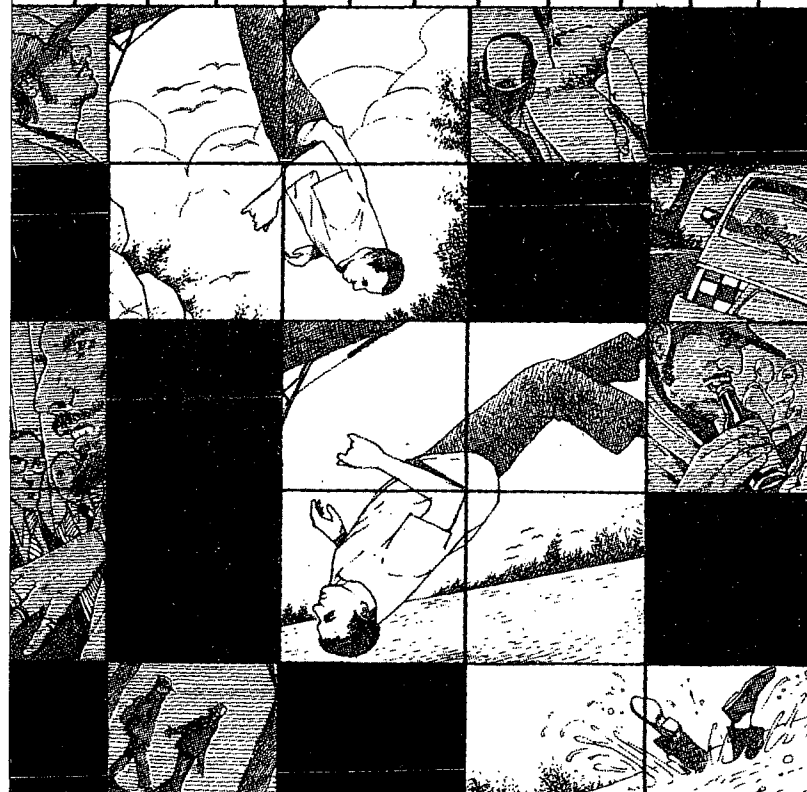


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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/02

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**I**t was Pete's idea to go down to the bridge at Lockport, throw out their lines, and try to hook the big one. If they hadn't done that, they wouldn't have seen anything in the first place. And if they hadn't seen anything, they wouldn't be stuck here in Chief Robideau's office answering a lot of stupid questions when they could be enjoying Happy Hour at the Netley: free munchies and half-price beer.

But here they sat—Wilmer Gates and Pete Melynychuk—trapped in back-busting straight-backed chairs, watching the chief pace slowly but irritably between his desk and the big streaked window that looked out onto Burton Street.

He nodded at the note he'd just placed in Pete's hands. "What does that look like to you?"

Pete shrugged. Five words in block letters, pegged out in felt-tipped marker:

SAVE THE PLANET!  
TICKETY TOCK!

"I dunno. Some kinda gag?"

The chief reclaimed the note. "A gag. That would be nice. Except that the first note, which came a week ago, says 'BOOM!' Which makes this pretty obviously a bomb threat. Which means I don't have a whole lot of time."

"Oh well, then," Pete said, starting to rise from his chair, "we won't bother you. We'll just—"

"You'll just sit back down," the chief said. "I'm simply pointing out that there are some serious issues on my plate at the moment." He did his slow-motion blink. "Now where were you, exactly, when this alleged incident took place?"

"We told you," Pete said. "On the west side of the locks, on that concrete pier, with our lines in the water. *I* wanted to fish the other side, get one of them little boats they got there and drift out into the fast water, but this dope wouldn't go for it. Too dangerous, he said. And what'd we catch? Nothing! This guy—"

"And you were there on the pier, both of you, when the car drove up onto the bridge? It must have passed right behind you. You didn't hear it go by?"

"Chief! You can't hear nothing sitting there, what with the water pourin' over the spillway like ten thousand thundering urinals. You been there! You know what it's like!"

"And so neither one of you paid any attention to the car at first. You didn't notice when it stopped halfway across the dam."

They glanced at each other, shook their heads. No.

"You weren't even aware of it until . . ."

"Until the body—we *think* it was a body . . ."

"It was a body, all right," muttered Wilmer.

"... came pin-wheelin' down an' hit the water, okay?" Pete eyed the door with longing. "'Course, we're guessing it hit the water. It disappeared into all that churned-up foam down there below and never came out. We looked up and saw a blue car drive away. That's all we know. Can we go now?" There was still time enough to catch the end of Happy Hour, a chance for a cheap round if they got a move on.

"Not a suicide," the chief mused, staring at the window.

"Why not?" Pete asked.

"Because if it was, who drove the car away?"

"Oh yeah."

"You're telling me it happened this morning. Early this morning." The chief gazed at each of them in turn. Large, weary eyes that nevertheless seemed to drill right into you. "How come it took you the entire day to come and say something to me about it?"

"Well, y'see," said Pete Melynychuk, "we weren't all that sure . . ."

"You sound pretty sure now."

"Now is now. Anyways, *this* guy—" nodding at Wilmer "—didn't want to get involved."

"I didn't? Me?" Wilmer reddened suddenly, a feisty, indignant look. "You're the one! I had to practically hogtie you and drag you here. You used every excuse why we ought to just mind our own beeswax!"

Chief Robideau turned away, trod slowly and heavily back across the room, and looked down at the notebook that lay open on his desk. There wasn't a whole lot written there. He tapped it with his pen, a small, thin, empty sound, then turned and fixed them with his big moody eyes again.

"I can tell there's something you two would rather be doing. I hope it's something useful. That's all, I guess. For now."

The featured band—Wayne Link and the Linkon Express—was wrapping up its matinee with "Faded Love." Lots of stirring steel guitar sounds. Wilmer burped and set down his first empty glass.

"All's well that ends well, right?"

It was an expression that had lodged itself in Wilmer's vocabulary lately, and it was getting on Pete's nerves.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Wilmer concentrated. "It means—"

"Never mind. Did you hear what the chief said? Something useful! What'd he mean by that crack?"

"Don't worry about it," Wilmer said. "Have another beer."

Which tasted good, as always, though it seemed especially good this time. Wilmer said it was because of what they'd accomplished that day.

"And what *did* we accomplish?" Pete asked.

"We saw a murder, didn't we?"

"We didn't see it exactly."

"All right, then, we saw half of it. The part that matters. For all we know the guy was still breathing when he made that swan dive down to Davy Jones."

"It's only a river, not an ocean, and we don't know for sure if it was a guy."

"Oh, it was a guy all right." Wilmer bristled with certainty. "You don't throw women off bridges. Not where I come from." He said it as if that would be a severe breach of etiquette.

It was getting noisy. People talking, TVs quacking, video games woofing. End of Main was a small town, squeezed between the enormity of the prairie and the vastness of Lake Winnipeg, but the Netley drew people from miles around: farmers, fishermen, businessmen, drunks. The room smelled of stale beer, mildew, and cigarette smoke.

"*Something useful*, the chief said!" Pete was still fuming.

"That really got to you, didn't it?"

"Well, why would he talk to us like that? We *did* somethin' useful. We were witnesses!"

"I just hope we weren't the only witnesses," Wilmer said, "because if we were and a body washes up, the chief won't leave us alone. He's like an old dog. An old retriever. He'll work on us till we're all chewed up, bomb threat or no."

"Bomb threat!" Pete almost sneered. "In End of Main!"

"In any case, he has no leads there; you heard him. So he'll pick on us all the more."

"Maybe now you see why I had to be 'hogtied and dragged!'"

Wilmer made no reply, only stared at the nearest TV screen. "I'm getting an idea," he said finally.

"Oh, jeez!" Pete reached for his glass.

"What we could do," Wilmer continued, "is poke around on our own, try to learn something about what we saw. If we could feed the chief a couple of facts, he'd go check them out and leave us alone." He grinned suddenly. "What do you think?"

"I think," Pete said, knuckling his grizzled chin with one large, knotted fist, "that you got a major screw loose."

"But listen—"

"No, you listen. We don't know nothing. We said so and it's a fact. Poke around? Poke around where? We wouldn't have the first clue."

"But—"

"But nothing. We got one lead. A blue vehicle. There must be thousands of them."

"But that's what I'm trying to tell you. There's something else!"

"Whadayamean?"

Pete's glassy, red-veined eyes searched Wilmer's face.

"There's something I didn't realize until now," Wilmer said. "But before I mention it, I want it understood that I *did* tell the whole truth

to Robideau. As far as I knew it at the time. It's just that now something else has jumped into my head."

Pete snorted. "An elephant could jump into your head. All that space."

"You want to hear this?"

Pete shut up.

Wilmer said, "That blue car? I think I caught the plate number."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. I remember part of it, at least. There was a V, then an E—and I think a four. I'm hazy about the next part, but I believe there were a few more numbers tacked on."

"Come off it. How could you see a plate number from where we were sitting, down below the bridge? We were lucky to see the top of the trunk!"

"At that particular instant, sure. But before that I was up at the car, remember? Getting another six-pack. And up at the car, I now realize, I saw a blue vehicle sitting a ways off. One guy in it. The back of his head showing. And I remember the plate number."

Pete sniffed. "*Part* of the number. Narrowing it down to the nearest zillion."

Wilmer tapped his beer glass thoughtfully. "I could give it straight to Robideau. Or I could phone my sister in the city. She works for Motor Vehicles. She'd be able to tell us something."

Pete studied on it, a tic working at the corner of his mouth. "Okay, so you give her a call. And she comes up with something. What then?"

"We pass it to Robideau. That gets him off our backs, which is all we want. It's not like we're trying to be heroes, right?"

Pete's eyes had a faraway focus.

"*Right?*" Wilmer prompted.

"Never mind heroes," Pete said. "The chief thinks we aren't even useful."

"You're back to that again. What I'm saying is, we don't want to go getting involved in anything. All's well that ends well, right?"

But Pete was getting a pensive light in his eye.

"Maybe *we* could go fishing," Mrs. Robideau said. "We never do anything."

"We're doing something right now."

"Cook and clean, that's all I do."

The chief sat hunched over the neatly laid-out dinnerware, a sprig of lilacs in a vase at the center of the table, and waited patiently while Mrs. Robideau drained the vegetables. She talked to him over her shoulder.

"You could buy us tickets to the Great Torino."

"Who and what is that?"



"I told you. You don't listen."

"I listen. I just don't hear sometimes."

"He's a magician. A 'metaphysical marvel,' the newspaper says. Betsy Hale went and says it's true. He hypnotizes folks—ten, twenty at a time. Gets them to bark like dogs when he snaps his fingers."

"I've got people barking and snapping at me all day long as it is," Robideau said. "And now I've got these bomb threats. On top of that, as I've just told you, Pete Melynychuk and Wilmer Gates are claiming they saw somebody get thrown off the Lockport bridge."

"And you don't believe them."

"It's *hard* to believe them. You have to know those two."

"No thank you."

"Three sheets to the wind every minute of the day."

"That much I do know."

"If I buy what they're saying, I'll have to arrange to drag the river. It'll take me away from this bomb threat. And if they were simply hallucinating, which is entirely possible . . . well, you get my drift."

"What you're saying is, only sober people can report murders. That if you're not the president of the Teetotaler Society or an admiral in the Salvation Army, then you might as well keep your mouth shut; don't bother Police Chief Robideau about it, he's got more important things to do, like catching international terrorists. That's what you're saying."

"I don't think the Salvation Army has admirals."

She set a steaming plate in front of him: pork roast, potatoes with gravy, peas and carrots. It smelled delicious.

"Look," the chief said defensively, "they don't remember much. I'm saying it might be better to wait. See if anyone's reported missing. Or see if a body washes up."

She sat down. "What you need to do, in my opinion, is not stand around while folks get pushed into rivers. It could be me next time getting the heave-ho."

The chief took a bread roll. "What do you suggest?"

"Call those men back in and ask more questions. Better yet—" her face shone with sudden insight "—sit them down with the Great Torino. He'll get something out of them. They'll remember things they never knew in the first place."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of," the chief said. "I think I'll wait and see what washes up."

One plate, one glass, one fork and spoon. All there was to your dishes when you lived alone. Mrs. Valacourt rinsed and dried them, staring out the kitchen window into the yard next door, seeing Charlie Park's antenna mast, gaunt against a gray sky, dominating the shed below, his radio shack as he called it.

She hadn't seen Mr. Park all day.

Of course, he could be out at one of his ham-fests. She smiled at that, in spite of herself. First hearing the expression, she had imagined some sort of picnic. People gorging themselves. Then Mr. Park had explained that it meant a gathering of amateur radio folks, hams, where used equipment was swapped and sold, old friendships renewed, jokes and gossip passed back and forth.

But hadn't Mr. Park—Charlie! He had told her to call him Charlie!—hadn't Charlie said he would take her along with him to the next one?

Her smile faded.

He would have invited her. Lately it seemed they were spending more and more time together. And so she worried. What if something had happened to him?

**W**ilmer Gates came hustling breathlessly across Burton Street to where Pete Melynychuk leaned against the front of the PayLess Drug Store, waving a scrap of paper in the air. Like he had something important to tell, something exciting.

"I talked to my sister. Explained everything. Thought I'd have to leave it with her awhile but she did a search on it right away. Computers!"

"Never mind computers. What did she say?"

Wilmer was so pleased with himself, you could thump him.

"The VE4 narrowed things down pretty good. She didn't need the computer for that, knew it right off the top of her head. Those markings are only used by certain people. And guess who."

"I don't want to guess."

"Come on, take a shot at it."

Pete spat on the sidewalk and looked fierce.

"Three-legged, red-headed monkey-whackers!"

"Wrong." Wilmer was practically levitating under the strain of keeping his news bottled up. "Guess again."

Pete closed a big hand on the front of Wilmer's shirt. "Guess this. If you don't cough up your story in the next five seconds, someone else is goin' off that bridge, and I wonder who!"

"Okay, okay!" Wilmer pried Pete's fingers loose. "Hams," he said.

"What?"

"You heard me. Hams."

"Hams as in actors like you?"

"No, hams as in amateur radio. VE4. That's the start of their call sign around here. What a lot of them put on their license plates. So it tells us the blue car must be owned by an amateur radio guy."

"What else?"

"Nothing else!"

"Then what's that scrap of paper you're hanging onto like it was a winning ten million dollar lottery ticket? You said your sister used the computer."

"Oh, right." The paper fluttered in the breeze as Wilmer held it in front of his face. "A statistic. There's about thirteen hundred people got that designator on their plate."

"I'd be happier if there was only one person. I mean, thirteen hundred? And most of them will be in the city, only a half-hour's drive out to Lockport. Could be any one of 'em."

"Any one of them that drives a *blue car*!" Wilmer was beginning to look annoyed. "And remember, hams need permits—radio licenses. Which means that their names are all wrote down on a list someplace. We can pass this information to Robideau."

"Did you get a copy of that list?"

"Well, no, but . . ."

"Do you have a printout of all them VE4 plate numbers?"

"No . . ."

"So what have you got, then, really?"

Wilmer looked frustrated. He walked to the curb and glared out at Burton Street, his gaze wandering to the two or three blue vehicles parked there. Then he turned around and he was smiling again.

"I just thought of something else. The person we're looking for has most likely got a huge radio antenna in their back yard. *Really* huge, higher than the roof of their house." He chuckled. "You could call it a dead giveaway."

"Jeez!"

"Anyway, there's plenty here to interest the chief. This radio angle will keep him busy for sure."

Pete's expression remained fixed. "Here's a bulletin for *your* radio. You better start remembering the rest of that plate number."

"What for?"

"Because I just decided we're going to need it!"

Chief Robideau sat at home in his big chair, idly flipping channels on the TV, not seeing them, thinking out loud.

"The question is, who from around this area is the kind of person who might make these threats? I thought I knew who all the crazies were, but this doesn't fit any of them. He glanced at the latest note, spread in his lap, and read it aloud:

SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT!  
TICKETY TOCK!

"Sounds like somebody good and mad about something," said Mrs. Robideau. "Mad at the government. Mad about the environment."

That takes in a lot of territory. Heck, I'm mad at the government half the time myself."

"But you don't write threatening letters to the police."

"I don't have to. I've got you. Saves me postage."

The chief changed channels again, found a young lady explaining the weather in Bombay, India. "Maybe it's nothing. But I have to take it seriously."

"Unlike reports of people getting thrown off bridges."

"I take that seriously, too. If those guys were more definite about what they saw, it would help. A blue vehicle!" He shook his head.

Mrs. Robideau set up the ironing board in the dining room, began ironing his shirts, looking past him at the changing TV screen. He shot her a glance.

"Nothing to say?"

"What for? You don't listen."

Robideau breathed heavily. An extra-deep sigh that came from the very depths of his lungs. It must have got to her because she put down her iron.

"I already suggested—which proves my point, by the way—that you try a hypnotist." She hung up a pressed shirt by hooking it over the top of the dining room door. "The Great Torino. Right here in our town. When he leaves you'll have to settle for somebody that learned hypnotizing out of a schoolbook."

"You're onto that again."

"You asked."

"But is he available?"

"Everybody's available to the police."

The chief shut the TV off with a jab of his thumb. There were cases, of course, that had supposedly benefited from the aid of a hypnotist. That murder up in The Pas, for instance, where a man under hypnosis was able to recall a killer's plate number, or part of it. But that had been a sober man of normal intelligence, while in this case . . .

"I'll think on it," the chief said. "Mr. Torino probably gets paid by the minute."

Wilmer responded to Pete's suggestion with a start of alarm.

"The Great Tornado? And me?"

"Torino," Pete corrected him. He added, absently chewing on a swizzle stick as if to allay any worries, "You used to drive a Torino once, didn't you? A Ford Torino."

Wilmer shrugged. "That was ages ago. I didn't like that car. Blew up in my face. Practically killed me."

"Because you didn't put oil in it," said Pete, who clearly remembered that particular incident: the car breaking down in the middle of Burton Street with a sound like a stick of dynamite blowing out a wall of the bank.



"I did put oil in it—once," Wilmer said.

"All you have to do," Pete told him, "is humor the guy. Cooperate with him. See what else you can remember, that's all."

"I don't like it. Bill Winkie went to his show. Told me the Great Tornado had people runnin' up an' down the aisles like nut bars, howling."

"So what. You do that already."

"If I do it, it's 'cause I want to." Wilmer swished his beer around. "Also, I'm not big on pain."

"There's no pain."

"That's easy for you to say."

Pete slammed down his mug with a bang that made heads turn at the bar.

"You're gonna talk to this guy an' that's all there is to it! It might help us solve a murder, and then the chief would have to admit we done something useful. He'd have to take back what he said about us!"

"But the pain—"

*"There is no pain!"*

Pete leaned across the table at Wilmer and said in an evil tone through clenched teeth, "Except, of course, for those giant electrodes he shoves up your nostrils and into your brain. But that shouldn't bother you. Not with those nostrils. Not with that brain!"

Employing his usual powers of persuasion, Pete finagled free use of one of the meeting rooms at the back of the Netley. A long table, a dozen chairs, a small gooseneck lamp swiped from one of the rooms upstairs. The magician had specified the lamp. Now they sat waiting for the great man to appear—Pete, bright with anticipation; Wilmer, like a man about to be strapped into an electric chair.

"Hope he ain't late," Pete said, glancing at his watch. "I promised Ruby in Housekeeping we'd be outta here by lunchtime. We're still here when the manager comes in, he'll raise hell."

"What I'd like to know," Wilmer said, "is how you got the Great Tornado to agree to this."

"I got a way with people."

"You have a way, all right. I just hope you didn't cheese him off. If you did, I'm the one will suffer for it."

"Not to worry. Just remember, if he tells you to do something, you do it."

"Like what?"

"How do I know? He's a magician. He could order you to float through the air or something."

"I don't know how to float through the air."

"I'll help you," Pete said, with a practice sweep of his size twelve boot.

The Great Torino was five minutes late. He announced himself in the open doorway by bringing his heels together with a dry click. He was dressed entirely in powder blue: powder blue suit, shirt, tie, and a long powder blue coat that hung down to the floor. He had piercingly bright blue eyes and startling twisted eyebrows.

"You are Chief Robideau?" He had an imperious tone.

"That's me," Pete said, ignoring Wilmer's astonished stare. "Lemme take your coat."

"You don't look like a policeman."

"Undercover. How long will this take?"

The Great Torino raked him with skepticism a moment longer, then shrugged out of his coat and dropped it over a chair. "That depends entirely upon the subject, the force of the intellect with which I am expected to deal. Is this him?"

Peering at Wilmer.

"That's right," Pete said.

"Two minutes."

The magician moved briskly, pulling out two chairs, turning them to face each other, scanning the hastily scribbled list of questions Pete handed him. Pete dragged Wilmer forward and the Great Torino thrust out his chin.

"Sit."

"Is this gonna hurt?" Wilmer asked

The magician ignored him. "I said *sit*." Wilmer complied. "Now I need something from your pocket. Something personal. And hurry up about it."

Wilmer rummaged reluctantly through his pockets and dragged out a short Swiss Army knife.

"His toenail clippers," cackled Pete. "They're more personal to him than anything."

The magician snapped his fingers. "Give me a shoelace!"

Pete scowled, hunkered down, worked one of his bootlaces loose, and handed it over.

"Lights."

Pete turned off the fluorescents and they were barely able to see each other. The Great Torino then switched on the desk lamp, carving a little half moon of brilliance on the table edge. He threaded the pocket knife onto the shoelace and hung it over the lamp so that it dangled in the cone of light. Wilmer watched it suspiciously.

"Now you are going to leave us," said the magician. "Leave this room, your worries, your cares, watching the knife, thinking only about what I am saying to you, yes?"

"Uh . . . right," Wilmer said.

The magician touched his fingertip to the middle of Wilmer's forehead, then drew it slowly down to the bridge of Wilmer's nose, saying, "Going . . . going . . . gone!"

Wilmer sat there staring. The magician consulted the notes, gathering details. "Where were you this morning?"

"Sunday morning," Pete corrected him in a whisper.

"Where were you *Sunday* morning?"

Wilmer watched the glittering knife.

"Fishin'."

"Where were you fishing?"

"Down at Lockport. At the bridge. The dam."

"Which is it? A bridge or a dam?"

"It's both," Pete put in.

"You are there now. What do you see?"

Another thoughtful pause.

"Pete. I see Pete."

"And what is Pete doing?"

"Sneakin' a beer outta my sixer."

Pete smiled and beamed good-naturedly.

"What else do you see?"

"The river . . . the bridge . . . the gulls . . ."

"You feel the wind, you smell the water . . . it is pleasant."

"It smells like fish."

"You go back up the steps to obtain more beer. You notice a vehicle stopped some distance away. You take the beer in your hands and go back down the steps. Then something happens. Something falls from the bridge. A body. It strikes the water—"

"The foam," Pete corrected.

"Hush! You are shocked. You glance up to see where this body came from and you see the car, the same car you noticed a moment ago, speeding off."

"It didn't exactly speed," Pete said.

"Shut up!" The magician glared at Pete. He leaned over Wilmer, his eyebrows bristling. "Do you see everything I'm telling you?"

"I see it," Wilmer said.

"Good. Now think back. Back to when you were getting the beer, the moment you first noticed the blue car. Describe the occupants."

"One guy. Can't see him good. Just the back of his head."

"He is wearing a hat?"

"Nope . . . er, yeah. He *is* wearing a hat. A squashed-down kind of cap."

"And the car. What is its license number?"

A pause. Wilmer sorted through his thoughts, his suppressed memories, grimacing as if he had stomach pain. "V-E-4 . . ."

"Yes, go on."

"V-E-4 . . . then a space . . ."

"Yes, yes. What else?"

"Uh . . ."

"It's right there in front of you. Read it to us!"

"V-E-4 . . . space . . . then a 1 . . . then a 6 . . . and a 1."

"VE4 161. Is that correct?"

"Yup."

"Anything more?"

"Nope."

"Good. Wake up!" The Great Torino blew a puff of air into Wilmer's face as if blowing out a candle, and Wilmer gave a sharp snort and glanced around.

"How'd I do?"

"You did fine," Pete said cheerfully, turning up the lights. "We didn't even have to use the electrode on you." He handed the magician his coat. "Mr. Torino, send your bill around to the police station. Wilmer, get your sister on the phone. And gimme back my shoelace."

**R**ain gathered in little beads on the windshield, flicked away every few seconds by the chattering sweep of the wipers, worn blades smearing the glass more than they cleared it. The Lockport bridge loomed before them. Then grim, riveted trusses stretched overhead, and expansion joints passed under the wheels with dull thuds.

Through Pete's open side window they could see the river spreading below, the white riled-up waters, the billows of white foam.

"Nice place for a murder," Wilmer said.

Charles Walter Park was the registered owner of the blue car, or at least of the license plate, and the address Wilmer's sister had given them wasn't in End of Main but down in St. Edwards, south of the locks.

It was a trim little house, they discovered, almost a cottage, with a very green lawn and blinding white trim.

A very tall antenna tower stood in the back yard.

"Now remember," Pete told Wilmer, "this guy could be a psycho case. He might get ugly."

"That's okay."

"Why is that okay?"

"Because you're gonna knock, not me."

Pete rapped on the door with a sullen frown on his face. He waited a minute then rapped again.

"Harder," Wilmer advised.

Pete turned and glowered. "How would you like a posthypnotic suggestion?"

He pounded mightily on the door with the ball of his fist, and un-



expectedly, through the hedge, a voice spoke to them: "It's no use. I've tried. He doesn't answer."

They turned to look but couldn't see anyone. They went around the hedge to the neighbor's yard and found a pretty, grayhaired woman, early sixties, standing on her stoop with both hands pressed against her face as if she was worried half to death.

"I'm just about ready to call the police," she said. "I'm awfully worried. I last saw Mr. Park the day before yesterday. Late in the evening, puttering around his shack."

"Shack?" Pete raised his eyebrows. The house next door seemed to be anything but.

"His ham shack, I mean. That little building at the end of his garden." She pointed. "It's where he keeps his radio equipment. I took coffee out to him. A drop of Amaretto in it, the way he likes it." There was a desolate note in her voice, as though she couldn't comprehend this strange absence. "Mr. Park—Charlie—didn't seem very cheerful. But who can blame him, the way people behave."

"So Mr. Park is a bachelor?"

"He lives alone. Same as me. I sat out there with him Monday night. Radio equipment, books and files, world maps on the walls. 'Maybe you can talk to that nice Norwegian man again,' I told him—trying to cheer him up, you see. 'Think positive,' I said, 'don't let it get you down.'"

"Don't let what get him down?" Pete asked.

"Maybe," she said, "you should explain what you want with him."

She waited. She wanted to know. So Pete told her about the bridge. When he got to the part about the body falling into the river, she turned pale and sat down on the step.

"We don't know it was your Mr. Park," Wilmer pointed out.

"I'd have stayed with him all evening if I'd known he was going to disappear. That man has been getting meaner and meaner."

"What man?"

She closed her eyes.

"Mr. Park was talking to a friend in Ottawa one night when somebody broke in on them. It happens sometimes. They said that the frequency was in use. Asked this person to move. It's what hams do, a sort of—protocol. But this man got mad, started insulting them, making rude noises, trying to drown out their contact. They moved to a second frequency, but he found them again and kept on doing it. And he's been doing it for weeks."

"Making noise, trying to spoil their talk?"

She nodded.

"But how come?"

"Charlie thought it was because of something the man overheard. Something he took exception to. They'd been discussing their previ-

ous careers, you see—Charlie and his friend. They're both ex-federal government. Charlie worked at the Lockport dam. His friend worked in administration."

"So the guy interfered with them. Did Charlie call the cops?"

"No. He said the way it's supposed to work, you complain to some government department and they send inspectors around to sort things out."

"Only they didn't?"

"Mr. Park said the inspectors shy away from things like that. Besides, there aren't nearly enough of them to go around anymore."

"Did he ever put a name to this character?"

"Well, you're supposed to identify yourself every few minutes when you're on the air by giving your call sign. But this man never bothered. Charlie thought he might be a bootlegger—an illegal operator. Still, he did find out that the man was actually from right around here someplace."

"How?"

"The man mentioned something that only a person from this area would know. It upset Charlie. He said it was a 'fine business' when your own neighbor, out of thousands of people worldwide, behaved that way. He wanted to find out who it was, so he did a bunny hunt."

"What's that?" Wilmer asked.

"It's where hams try to find a transmitter, just for fun. I'm not sure how—by triangulation or something. And he did get a name. He asked me to look it up for him."

Mrs. Valacourt went into the house, reappeared with a small yellow Post-it note in her hand.

Pete squinted at the note and passed it to Wilmer.

It said: DRIZIK—RIVER ROAD.

They drove along River Road under dark, rolling clouds.

"I don't get it," Wilmer said. "Did Charlie kill Drizik, or was it the other way around?"

"Easy to find out," Pete replied. "Just see which one's still kicking. Apparently Charlie isn't." He pulled the old pickup over to the side of the road. "Bingo!"

He had stopped at a large ramshackle place, big as a barrack. With its rutted drive, crab grass, and dandelions, it looked out of place among the neighboring upscale homes. Even its trees looked disheveled and tattered.

But above the peak of its roof rose the top of a radio tower, and a leaning road sign near the drive bore stick-on reflective letters spelling LID.

"Drizik!" Pete said. "Got to be."

"What now?" Wilmer asked.

Pete picked at his teeth. "I'm not sure."

"What we should do, I think, is go tell Robideau."

"Not a chance. We're miles ahead of him. We could *solve* this thing. That'd shut him up good."

Wilmer squirmed uncomfortably. "Now, hold on. You're changing the plan. We weren't going to get involved, remember?"

"I changed my mind!" Pete got out and thrust his whiskery face in the window. "We're goin' up to that house and see who lives there."

"Not me. I'm not going near the place!"

It was a long stroll up the driveway, the house set back deep on its lot, Pete gripping Wilmer's arm the whole way. They bypassed the front entrance, virtually unapproachable with shrubbery twisting through iron railings and blocking the door. They continued to the back of the house.

A green pickup was parked there, tailgate down, sagging under a load of large, bulky yellow bags. A trampled strip of grass led to a large boathouse, its side door standing open, the gray glint of the river beyond it.

A man came out of the boathouse pushing a wheelbarrow. He gave a visible start when he saw them, dropped the handles and kicked the door shut. Then he picked up a shovel and came forward to meet them, his eyes quickly summing them up.

"If you're selling something . . ."

Pete was all smiles.

"No sir, we're not. We spotted your radio tower, and my buddy Flash, here, was curious on account of he's a ham himself. He thought you wouldn't mind givin' him the nickel tour."

The man was mid-forties, medium height, with a powerful frame and no discernable neck. A guy who could easily pitch someone off a bridge. He was also a deliberate thinker. "All right," he said, after a moment, "have a look."

The tower was much taller than it appeared from the road, and there were several antennas on it. The man seemed proud of it.

"Lots of metal up there, huh? The tri-bander is thirty-two feet across the boom. I work the world with it. The little two-meter vertical, I bought ten years ago. Got the yagi at the same time." He fixed his eyes on Wilmer. "So—Flash! What are you running?"

He waited, glaring inquisitorially at Wilmer, piercing him with a squinty gaze. Wilmer thrust his hands into his pockets. Just another ham.

"Oh, the tri-mander, definitely. All the way. And a couple horizontals an' Maggies. Turn on the juice, gets me all the way to . . . uh . . . Pittsburgh."

Scorn pinched the lined face.

"You don't say." The man had a dangerous look. "The rig is a TS-850. Got a couple of matched tetrodes in the final. What's your rig, Flash?"

Wilmer's discomfort turned to anguish. "Oh, one of them gray ones. Dials, knobs. A big button on it. And wires, lots of wires, stickin' out and hangin' down."

The look of scorn became a sneer.

"If you're a ham, my friend, I'm a radio astronomer."

"Hey listen," Pete broke in, "if you think—"

"Here's what I think. I think you're up to something." The shovel in his hands now looked less like a gardening implement and more like a martial arts weapon. "I think you boys better leave. And don't come back!"

A thin rain began to needle out of the sky. It was hard to walk back down the long driveway with dignity, the chunky guy on their heels, but they managed it. He watched them get in the truck, then stood glaring after them till they rounded a bend in the road.

Pete gave Wilmer a disparaging glance.

"A gray one? With a big button on it?"

"It was the best I could do."

"My Aunt Effie could do better, and she don't know a ham radio from a pork cutlet!"

"Look, I said I did my best! Anyway, all's well that ends well!"

"Will you stop saying that?" But Pete was thinking. "He's got the look. Real murderer type. We need a peek inside his place. Especially that boathouse. Did you see how quick he slammed the door?"

Wilmer's head snapped around.

"You want to go *back* there?"

"Damn right. We need to see what's what. I'm betting we find bloodstains splattered halfway up the walls. But first we'll need a few facts from that Mrs. Valacourt. A description of her friend Charlie. The clothes he wore. Any jewelry. Because we could trip over a clue and not even know it, right?"

It was a bright little kitchen, with hidden lighting and flowered wallpaper. A coffee percolator burped on the stove.

Pete liked the coffee but not the proposition.

"You're saying you'll help us if we take you along? But it'll be breaking and entering! We could wind up in jail!"

"I don't care." She wasn't backing down. "You need me. He can't be there when you go in. Have you figured out how to arrange that?"

They shook their heads; they hadn't figured out anything.

"He doesn't know my voice," she continued. "I could ring him up—an anonymous call—tell him that I know what he's done. I'll act like a blackmailer. Offer to meet him at the bridge, that should get him worrying."

Pete was interested.

"You'd do that?"

"I loved him—Charlie, I mean. You brought me that news, I've thought about it, and now it's hit me. I'm not going to see him again."

She didn't cry. Or if she did, they didn't notice. She turned her back and began rinsing coffee cups in the sink.

They sat in Mrs. Valacourt's car a quarter of a mile up River Road from Drizik's place, waiting for the man to back out of his drive and speed off. It wasn't happening.

"He's not going for it," Wilmer said.

"Or," Pete said, "he's left already."

"But we got here early."

"So what. So he had to drop off his dry cleaning first or something. It happens."

A cautious drive-by revealed that Drizik's truck wasn't there, so they parked on a side road and shoved Wilmer in through a flimsy aluminum window. He let them into a cavernous front room, moonlight filtering weakly through a filthy skylight, a dim patch of gray above them.

It had once been a living room but was now a workshop. Junk everywhere in jumbled heaps. Copper wire, microprocessors, gutted televisions, amplifiers, and radios. The contents of several repair shops flung together by a storm. There was even a workbench, complete with a drill press.

What they didn't see were any suspicious stains dripping off the walls.

"Look at this," Wilmer said, holding up a sheaf of Internet printouts. "Stuff on ecology." He peered closer. "The damage dams can do."

"And here." Pete was at the workbench, a door laid across stacked milk crates, the level surface strewn with small metal boxes, bits of wire and switches. "Looks like he builds things. Electronic things."

They all stood there, puzzled. Wilmer said:

"I wonder where he keeps his—uh—rig?"

But they saw no shortwave radio. They even looked in the cellar, the basement stairs off the back landing, which sloped away into blackness like a passage in an Egyptian tomb.

Nothing.

Pete said, "Only place left is the boathouse."

They then pried open the door of the boathouse with Drizik's own shovel.

But there were no signs of violence here. Only an ancient cabin cruiser, her name—*Rettysnitch*—freshly painted on her bow. She sat very low in the water, and there were a lot of large, empty yellow bags scattered around.

Pete kicked at one. "What all this?"

Wilmer stooped and read the labeling. "Potassium Nitrate—Product of Saskatchewan." He looked at another one that had a soft yellow powder trailing out of it. "And sulfur."

"Here's his radio," said Mrs. Valacourt, pulling a dust cover aside. She revealed it with her torch in swaying shadows. The brand name "Kenwood" stood out on it in raised lettering. "And look at this." She picked up a small cassette player and pressed the PLAY button. What they heard was not music but a cacophony of bells, police whistles, sirens, gunshots, wild laughter, and other sound effects. She snapped it off in the middle of a staccato burst of machine-gun fire.

"I've heard that before!" Mrs. Valacourt's eyes were bright and animated. She popped the tape out, held it under the torch. "This is what was played over the air to spoil Charlie's transmissions."

"Are you sure?" Pete asked.

"Positive. I heard it lots of times."

"Too bad we can't prove it."

"But we can. Charlie recorded those transmissions. His tapes can be matched to this one."

Pete's eyes lit up. "Good. We'll take it with us."

There was a thud outside. A vehicle door slamming. They all jumped.

"Honey, he's home," whispered Pete. He shook off Wilmer's hand, which had clamped onto him like a pair of tongs.

"Maybe he won't come in here." Mrs. Valacourt crept to the door and peered out. "Looks like he's going on a trip. Putting his bags in the truck."

Then she came scurrying back to them. "Quick! Hide!"

They heard the swish of footsteps in the ragged grass. Without a word they scrambled aboard the boat and dove down into the cuddy-cabin.

A switch clicked and the boathouse was filled with light. The footsteps came toward them, and the boat rocked as someone stepped aboard.

Drizik's big, raggedy-sneakered feet appeared on the cuddy stairs, with a heavy copper bar he held gripped in his hand. He bent low to peer into the cuddy showing his face and his nasty grin when he spotted them.

"Well, well, it's Flash, the ham radio expert. And there's his pal . . . and I'll be darned if they didn't bring their grandmother along."

"We can explain," Wilmer offered. But he could think of no explanation at all.

"Where's Mr. Park?" Mrs. Valacourt broke in sharply, coming right to the point.



"That voice. You're the lady that called me. Sent me off on that wild goose chase."

He sat down, blocking the companionway, and suddenly slammed the heavy bar against the bulkhead. "Flash, you've been a very bad ham—you *and* your friends." He gave another hard swat. The bar was long, flat, and shiny, with holes drilled at intervals along its length. "You're worse than that old Elmer who came snooping around."

"He means Charlie," Mrs. Valacourt explained. A trance-like calm seemed to have come over her. "An Elmer is someone who helps people."

"Someone who sticks his nose in, you mean!"

"What happened to Charlie?" Pete demanded.

Drizik thought a minute, then decided to tell them.

"If you mean that old guy, he came here to threaten me. Said he'd have my license pulled. Which is pretty funny, 'cause I don't have a license. I told him so, too. All the better, he said, 'cause that would get me into even more trouble. Like having my radio impounded. Now that made me mad."

He smacked the bar on the stairs.

"That radio keeps me in touch with friends all over the world. Folks who are trying to save the planet. Without my radio, I'd go nuts!"

"Short trip," Pete mumbled.

Drizik stiffened. "Time to go, kiddies. You all got ringside seats!"

He heaved his broad rump up one step higher, reached into the cabin above, and fumbled with something. Then he pointed to a small switch plate halfway down the companionway. "See that? Motion detector. Don't try coming up these stairs."

He backed all the way out. There was a rocking and a slosh of water as he left the boat.

Wilmer said, "What the heck did he mean by that?"

The boathouse light dimmed, then faded, as Drizik shoved the *Rettysnitch* out into the river; they felt the grip of the slow, lazy current and heard the lapping of water against the hull.

"What's he doing?" Wilmer asked.

"He's going to blow something up," said Mrs. Valacourt, "and us with it, I'm afraid."

"Nobody's blowin' me up!" said Pete with defiance, and he put one foot on the companionway.

"Don't forget the motion detector."

"Jeez!" He drew back. "So," he said, "he's going to blow up the dam. That's where the current is carrying us. We crash into it, and boom!"

Mrs. Valacourt thought for a minute.

"I don't think so. He'd need a triggering mechanism around the en-

tire hull. But he is a ham, isn't he? My bet is he watches the boat from somewhere, then sets the charges off by remote control."

They were quiet for a while, thinking.

"We'll be at the dam in a few more minutes," Mrs. Valacourt said. "One of us has to reach up the stairs and get that copper bar he dropped."

"Why?" Pete frowned.

"I have an idea. The question is, can we get the bar without triggering that motion detector?"

She eyed a space above Pete's head, reached up, and dragged down a curtain rod. She bent the tip of it into a hook.

"What do you think?"

Pete maneuvered to the foot of the companionway and gingerly shoved the mangled curtain rod up the stairs. They held their breath. He fumbled once, making Wilmer gasp, then managed to snag the bar and drag it into the cabin.

Pete wiped perspiration from his face. "Now what?"

"Now," said Mrs. Valacourt, "we sink the boat."

"Say what? You want us to—"

"Sink the boat. Make a hole in it."

"But this is the deepest part of the river!"

"Can't be helped. We have to let the water in, soak the chemicals so that the bomb won't go off."

"But we'll drown!"

"I suggest we get started. Pick a spot you think might be rotten."

Pete looked at Wilmer and shrugged. He knelt down and started hacking away. The decking was in good shape; it took him ten minutes to make a hole in it. But the outer hull was mostly dry rot. One strong thrust of the bar and water started gurgling in.

"Don't stop," said Mrs. Valacourt, "make it as big as you can. We don't know how much time we have."

The river poured in quickly. They were up to their waists in minutes. They waited until the water touched the motion detector, then splashed up the companionway.

Now they could see where they were. The Lockport bridge loomed over them, the river current drawing them to it.

"That's it!" Wilmer yelled. "That's what he's after—the dam!"

They were maybe twenty yards from the bank, if that. "Can you swim?" Pete asked Mrs. Valacourt.

"I used to be a damn good swimmer," she said, "forty years ago."

"Well, I'm a lousy one. So maybe *you* help *me*."

They all jumped into the river.

The *Rettysnitch* blew up before they made it halfway to shore. There was still enough dry chemical aboard her to send a water spout thirty feet up in the air and rattle windows all along the shore.

**T**he chairs in Robideau's office hadn't gotten any more comfortable since their last visit, and the beer down at the Netley seemed even more inviting.

But there were things the chief had to get straight.

He held the cassette tape Wilmer had given him, pinching it between thumb and forefinger.

"So Charlie Park made a tape of his own?"

"That's right, Chief. Off the air. Mrs. Valacourt will show it to you. I bet you find it matches up perfectly with Drizik's tape, the one you got there—once you dry that one out."

Robideau had already told them that a body had washed up. It was Park all right. The Mounties had Drizik under arrest and were searching his house.

Pete said, "What I think is, Charlie knew all the legal hams in the area, so when he spotted Drizik's place he got suspicious. He knocked on the door and tried to reason with him."

"Only to reason with him?"

"Chief! He wasn't going to physically assault the man. Charlie Park was sixty-seven years old, for cryin' out loud!"

"And Lester Ivan Drizik is a nut bar," Wilmer added.

The chief studied them across the desk from his tilted chair, fingers laced across his stomach, watchful eyes measuring them with a cautious appreciation. "I phoned the city and talked to the bomb squad. Apparently that floating mine could have done some serious damage. What I'm trying to say is—you did all right."

"Just all right?"

The chief cleared his throat. He winced.

"You did well. Very well."

Pete smiled. He winked at Wilmer.

"But . . ." the chief continued.

Pete waited for it.

"There is one other thing."

"What other thing?"

"You haven't told me how you got onto this guy Drizik. And . . ." He raised an envelope from his desk. "There's this invoice. Three hundred dollars for the services of one Albert Santos, a.k.a. the Great Torino. Addressed to me. Would you know what that's about?"

Wilmer said, "Well, Chief, the truth is—"

Pete got up and pulled Wilmer out of his chair. "The truth is, Chief, you better pay it. You don't want no Great Torino mad at you."

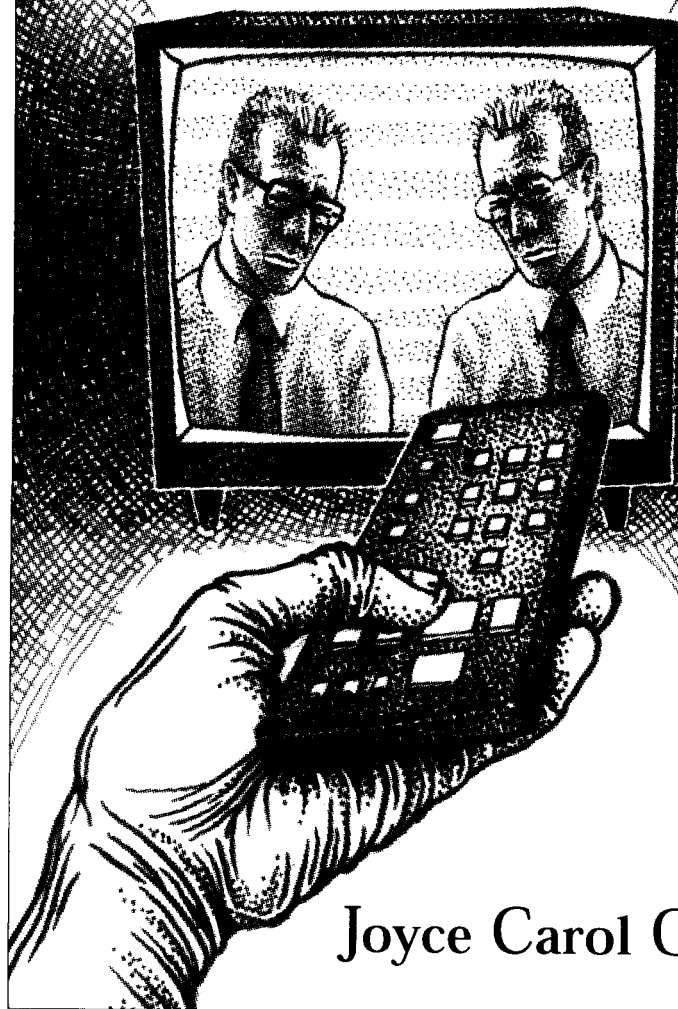
He shouldered Wilmer to the door, stopped, and leaned back into the room.

"Besides, all's well that ends well—right?"

FICTION

# THE TWINS:

## A MYSTERY



Joyce Carol Oates

*Illustration by M. Bilokur*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/02*

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“What’s on?”

Elderly retired Dr. A—— takes up the black plastic remote control in his slightly palsied hand, steadies it with his other hand, and presses POWER. Like a magician’s wand, the remote control causes the blank glassy face of the TV set to come alive. At once there’s an antic, not very convincing image on the screen. Dissatisfied, Dr. A—— switches channels, with stabbing gestures of the remote control in the direction of the set.

“Nothing. Nothing is ever on.”

And then, on channel 48, a cable channel, there’s a suddenly familiar face. Two faces. Dr. A—— peers at the screen with sudden interest.

“Well, something.”

They were twins. Identical twins. They preferred to think of themselves as brothers merely.

To be childhood twins is adorable. To be adult twins is abominable.

And so they were twins—they were brothers—with a healthy skeptical attitude regarding the mystique of *twinness*. They clipped out tacky articles from the tabloids—PSYCHIC-TWIN stories—TWINS-SEPARATED-AT-BIRTH stories—to send to each other.

In biological terms, they were “identical” twins because their DNA was identical. Their chromosomes were identical. In fact, they were mirror-twins.

Meaning that their faces, otherwise quite ordinary (though somewhat asymmetrical) Caucasian-male faces, halved, made a complete face.

If, for instance, you vertically dissected B—— and C——’s faces and matched the right half of B——’s face with the left half of C——’s face, you would have a “perfect” match.

The parts in their hair fell naturally on opposite sides of their heads. B——’s left eye was weaker than his right eye, and C——’s right eye was weaker than his left eye. B——’s habit of smiling, lifting the left side of his mouth initially, was mirror-matched by C——’s habit of lifting the right side of his mouth initially. B—— was right-handed, C—— was left-handed (though C——, a strong-willed boy, managed to teach himself to become ambidextrous: “To fit into a tyrannical right-handed world”). B——’s most severely ingrown wisdom tooth, removed when he was twenty-nine, was just behind his upper left molar, and C——’s most severely ingrown wisdom tooth, removed when he was thirty, was behind his upper right molar.

Of course, their well-intentioned mother had dressed them as twins in their early childhood. Their father had taken numerous photographs of them as babies, as toddlers, as small boys, both clothed and unclothed, out of a fascination with their twinness,

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which he believed had its source in his ancestral genes.

Their mother gradually realized, as the boys grew, that their twinness, so remarked upon by others, made them uneasy. She ceased dressing them as twins by the time they were eight. They went to the same elementary school but were sent to separate New England boarding schools. They went to separate New England universities. B— was married first, at the age of twenty-six; when C— married, at the age of twenty-seven, it was remarked that, contrary to the clichés of twinness, he married a woman very different from his brother's wife.

At least, that was the impression.

The brothers' wives made an effort to "like" each other. But they made little effort to come together socially. It may have been a disorienting experience for B—'s wife, for instance, to find herself in close physical proximity to C—, the identical twin of the man with whom she was intimate; as C—'s wife very likely mirrored this discomfort, their social occasions were awkward. And there was Dr. A— overseeing "family" occasions. In time, B—'s wife encouraged her husband to see C— alone, for dinner; C—'s wife may have been slightly jealous of the brothers' closeness, but not excessively. B—'s wife may have been jealous of C—'s wife, but not excessively.

B— was a CPA. C— was head of the local branch of a well-known national insurance company. Neither had considered medical school, not for a single hour.

Was Dr. A— bitterly disappointed at his sons' refusal to honor him by entering his profession? Or was Dr. A— only moderately disappointed and given to ironic asides in his sons' company as a way of allowing them to know the contour of his feelings, without knowing the depth? The brothers, during their evenings together, speculated endlessly on this subject, but inconclusively.

The fact was, B— and C— were mild-mannered individuals. As if by design each had become middle-aged in his late twenties. Their squirrel-colored hair, thinned at the crowns of their heads, gave them a boyish, questing look. B— wore steel-rimmed glasses and C— wore wireless oval glasses. Their eyes required bifocals when they were in their early forties. B— carried himself with the affable resignation of a man carrying a soft, not heavy but cumbersome bundle, like a bag of laundry. C—, who was determined to be the "athletic, active" brother, made it a point to walk with a spring in his step, even when not observed by witnesses.

Their mother died of a particularly virulent, quickly acting cancer when B— and C— were forty-two years old. They grieved for her bitterly, but in mutual silence, not needing to speak. It was possible that identical spasms of pain gripped the brothers at the time of their mother's death and that they endured identical nightmares on the



anniversary of her death, and dreamt often of her, but they never spoke of it. They were stoic, they suffered inwardly. The prevailing fact that their mother had died and left them with their father was a source of perpetual concern of which, too, they never spoke.

For what was there to say? *If only he'd died in her place . . . ?*

When the brothers met, they never embraced but they shook hands warmly, and in the eyes of each the pain and continuing wonder of their mother's absence from the world shone. And a crushing awareness then of the prevailing fact of their father's continued existence. Then a tic of a smile began at the left corner of B——'s mouth, and a tic of a smile began at the right corner of C——'s mouth, and their mood changed.

The brothers were not maudlin individuals. They scorned the victim culture. Passivity, self-pity. They were intelligent, well-to-do men who firmly believed themselves immune to the social pathogens of the era.

Their father was living. And aging.

It was remarked by B——'s wife, as by C——'s wife, that their father-in-law, Dr. A——, always a difficult and somewhat enigmatic personality, was becoming more difficult, and more enigmatic, with age.

Dr. A—— had finally retired as a physician, reluctantly, in his mid-seventies. Still, the old gentleman prided himself on being a "highly paid consultant" in his rarefied field of neurophysiology.

Since his wife's death, Dr. A—— expected his sons to telephone him at least once a week. It was his custom to telephone them on Sunday evenings, though not every Sunday; if Dr. A—— telephoned his sons, it would be on Sunday evening. The brothers soon came to realize that Dr. A—— telephoned B—— first, and then C——. Not once had he varied in this custom. If B—— wasn't home to take the call, he delayed calling C—— until B—— returned.

(Why? Because B—— was the elder of the brothers by eight minutes.)

Dr. A—— had long ago ceased to photograph B—— and C—— as twin specimens; yet he had long "pitted" the brothers against each other. ("Competition is the source of genetic excellence. 'Survival of the fittest.' Otherwise, society becomes dysgenic. Races sink into degeneracy, and die out.")

Only in late adolescence did B—— and C—— understand that their father was manipulating them into rivalries, and they declared a secret truce between themselves.

"Our allegiance is to each other. Not to *him*."

When Dr. A—— began to remark that neither of his sons was showing "much evidence of virility, still less of fertility" (in a crude though elliptical allusion to the fact that neither B—— nor C—— seemed to be inclined to have children), the brothers maintained a dignified silence.

Still, B—— secretly believed that C—— was their father's favorite, and C—— secretly believed that B—— was their father's favorite. Each thought of the other, "He can do no wrong in Dad's eyes."

Dr. A—— may have grieved at his wife's death, but he'd made a remarkable recovery. A lifelong enthusiast, he was inclined now to a robust, cheery nihilism. B—— believed that his father was a depressive personality; C—— believed he was more inclined to paranoia, mania. Their wives thought the old man was "normal"—if "eccentric." He was healthy yet frugal in small, you might say spiteful, matters. The cut-rate funeral for his wife, for instance. ("What's the purpose of an expensive funeral other than to provide income for funeral directors? Tell me.") The family home, a distinguished old English Tudor set back from the street in the city's historic district, had grown shabby since Mrs. A——'s death, with an air of purposeful dereliction. Vivid green moss grew in clusters on the slate roofs; thistles and tiny saplings like rogue thoughts began to sprout in the rain gutters. The asphalt circle driveway was festooned with myriad weblike cracks. Shades were often drawn on all the windows facing the street, so that the effect was of a multitude of blank, blind yet staring eyes.

The brothers were concerned: When Dr. A—— died, would they jointly inherit the old house? Or would Dr. A——, performing a scenario of his secret devising, leave the house, perhaps even the bulk of his estate, to one brother, excluding the other?

For this reason alone, B—— and C—— dreaded their father's death, though they thought of it constantly.

One evening when the brothers were forty-nine years old, B—— glanced up from a book he was reading about Arctic explorations (B——'s amateur passion was for polar explorations, C——'s inclined to the American Civil War) with an expression of mild anxiety. His wife asked what was wrong, and before B—— could reply, the phone rang. B——'s wife said, with a smile, "That's your brother." B—— said, "I hope not." He meant to be amusing, of course.

When B—— picked up the phone, however, there was C—— at the other end. Before C—— could say more than hello, B—— said grimly, "Something has happened to Dad, hasn't it? That's why you're calling."

C—— was silent, as if taken by surprise. He may have misinterpreted B——'s tone. He was often annoyed by what he called his brother's "aggressive sense of humor."

B—— said apologetically, "I'm sorry. Is something wrong?"

C—— told B—— that nothing was wrong that he knew of. He was simply calling to say hello.

B—— doubted this. B—— said, "Did you say you'd heard from Dad?"

"No. Not me. Didn't he call you last Sunday? That's the last time I heard from him."

"Last Sunday? I don't think so. It was two weeks ago."

"Two weeks? Are you sure?"

"I think so, yes. Unless he called you more recently."

"He wouldn't have called me without calling you. You know that."

"I don't know that. I can't possibly know that."

"Well. Did you call Dad? Did you speak with him this week?"

"I called him, but he didn't answer. I called several times."

"I called, and he didn't answer. I assumed he would call this Sunday."

"You mean, last Sunday."

"Do I? No. I don't think so."

The line was silent. Each of the brothers was beginning to be upset. B——'s wife, standing in the doorway behind him, saw his shoulders stiffen and his hand rise to stroke his thinning hair in a way that touched her heart. C——'s wife, observing her husband in a similar posture, frowning, running a hand through his thinning hair, felt a stab of resentment, jealousy. For no one meant so much to C—— than B——. No marriage could mean so much to C—— and B—— as the fact of their *twinness*.

The brothers conferred with mounting concern. It was determined that neither had spoken with their father in more than two weeks, though each had called, dutifully. Since Dr. A—— scorned such devices as answering machines or voice mail, there was no way to leave a message for him.

B—— said hesitantly, "Dad has been fatigued lately. He hasn't been himself."

C—— said, "Who is he, then?"

B—— laughed. "Got me."

C—— said, "I'm serious. Who is he?"

Again the brothers were silent. Each was thinking a dread thought.

When they spoke, each spoke at the same time: "We'd better go to the house. Immediately."

In separate cars, from their separate homes on opposite sides of the city, the brothers drove to Dr. A——'s house. B——, who'd quit smoking (but kept a pack of mentholated cigarettes in the glove compartment of his car in case of emergency), fumbled to light a cigarette, his first in nearly a year. When he arrived at their father's house, there was C—— standing on the front walk, smoking a cigarette and smiling strangely. Like B——, C—— had quit smoking recently. C—— said, "I've rung the doorbell, and I've knocked. I tried to look in the downstairs windows."

B—— said, "Dad would be upstairs. Probably."

"In the bedroom. Probably."

B—— and C—— tried the doorbell another time and knocked on the heavy oak door. No answer. So far as they could see, the house was darkened downstairs. Shades were drawn over the windows that were filmy, almost membranous, with years of accumulated grime.

“Dad’s deer rifle. You didn’t think we should take it from him.”

“How could we ‘take it from him?’ Dad wouldn’t have allowed us.”

“We might have taken it without asking. To prevent something like this.”

The brothers had begun to speak heatedly, without looking at each other. Neither could clearly recall which of them had first suggested “taking Dad’s deer rifle,” nor could he recall where the rifle might be kept, or even if their father still owned it. The old man had not gone hunting in more than a decade. Two decades? He’d been disappointed, in his sardonic way, that neither of his sons had cared to go hunting with him more than once, not even as adolescents. To have so much as mentioned the deer rifle to Dr. A—— would have been awkward and offensive, so the brothers said nothing, finally. Now B—— saw C—— pass a shaky hand over his eyes. C—— was looking pale, distraught. *He has been here already. He has seen, and he knows.* When C—— glanced up at B——, he winced, as with pain or guilt.

B—— said suddenly, “You’ve been here already, haven’t you? You know what’s happened to Dad.”

C—— protested, “Are you serious? No.”

“That’s why you called me, isn’t it?”

“What? You called me.”

“That was last week. Last time. Tonight, you called me.”

“I did not. This is ridiculous. I was reading when the phone rang.”

“I was reading when the phone rang.”

B—— was staring at C——. His heart had begun to beat rapidly. He was thinking that they were barely brothers any longer, let alone twins. He said, trying to keep his voice calm, “Well, have you?”

“Have I what?”

“Been here already? Earlier today? So you know what’s—what’s waiting for us upstairs?”

C—— said, his voice shaking, “Have you?”

B—— made a gesture of supreme exasperation, disgust. C—— made a similar gesture, cursing under his breath. Both brothers were on the weedy sidewalk leading to the rear of the house. They were shocked to see that large chunks of slate and mortar had fallen from the roof of the house into the overgrown lawn. A flock of noisy starlings beat their wings overhead. There was a smell here of something clotted and backed-up, like sewage. Their father’s regal old black Lincoln Continental was parked half in, half out of the garage as if it had run out

of gas at just that moment. The rear half of the car was covered in coarse birdlime.

At the back door of the house, which opened into a narrow entryway and into the darkened kitchen, both brothers hesitated. Was the door locked? (It was.) Who would be the one to smash the window, reach inside, and turn the knob? (For if Dr. A— was waiting inside, in perfectly good health, he would be furious with his intrusive sons.) C— urged, “Go on. Do it.” B— urged, “You. You’re Dad’s favorite.”

“The hell I am. You’re the ‘elder.’”

“You’re the ‘baby.’”

“Look, Dad has always favored you. Admit it.”

“Dad has always favored *you*. I’m not blind.”

“I’m not blind.”

B— came close to jostling C—, nudging him with his elbow as a boy might do, not to hurt but to assert power, rectitude. C—, panting, stood his ground as if daring his brother to touch him.

At last, B— acted. He smashed the window not with his fist, but with heavy, badly rusted gardening shears lying on the rear porch.

“All right. You first.”

“You first.”

**A**s soon as the brothers entered their former home, which seemed hardly recognizable now, the smell struck them like a wall.

*A smell of—what?*

*Rot, decay? Organic decomposition?*

*A smell of death?*

B— murmured faintly, “Oh Christ.”

C— whispered, “God . . .”

Like frightened children the brothers entered the kitchen. The room was considerably larger and shabbier than they recalled. The ceiling must have been twelve feet above their heads; the badly worn linoleum was sticky against the soles of their shoes. In the sunken sink, which more resembled an old-fashioned washtub than a kitchen sink, disorderly stacks of dirtied dishes soaked in a fungoid-gray water.

B— said, “He must have gone mad. He was planning this.”

C— said, “If you thought so, why didn’t you say something? You spoke with him last.”

“I didn’t speak with Dad last! You did.”

“If you knew he was suicidal . . .”

“I didn’t know. But I think you knew.”

This time the brothers brushed against each other, as if accidentally. A sensation like translucent blue flames ran over their arms where they’d touched and seemed to ignite a similar fierce, near-invisible fire

in their brains. Both were panting, but trying to breathe shallowly through their noses, sickened by the smell.

They had no choice but to push forward. Their father would be upstairs. They entered the shadowy back hall and approached the stairs. Here the smell was even stronger, wafting downstairs like mist. Something scuttled away along the carpet with an air of indignation.

B—— said, half-pleading, “You have been here already, haven’t you? You can tell me.”

C—— made the airy, exasperated gesture of dismissal another time, and B—— caught at his arm. “Just tell me. The truth.”

C—— said, “I was not here. But I think you were, and you were afraid to discover him by yourself. So you called me.”

“I said I did not call you! You called me.”

“And you’re the one with the key. The beloved ‘elder.’ The favorite son.”

“That’s crazy. I don’t have a key. You know that Dad didn’t entrust keys to this house to anyone.”

“Do I? I know that? On whose authority, yours?”

C—— spoke sneeringly, though he was sickly pale and obviously very frightened. By this time both brothers were ascending the stairs, which creaked beneath their weight. They moved with painful deliberation, as if the pull of Earth’s gravity had suddenly trebled. The air on the staircase and at the head of the stairs was humid, shimmering. It was all the brothers could do to keep from gagging. Now B—— was gripping C——’s arm at the elbow, and C—— didn’t throw off his hand.

Slowly they made their way along the upstairs hall, which was darker than the downstairs hall and longer than they recalled. They passed their former rooms: the doors appeared to be nailed shut. At the far end of the hall was their parents’ sumptuously furnished bedroom, the master bedroom as it was called, which had been forbidden to B—— and C—— as children. If the door was open, and their mother called them inside, they were welcome to enter (and what a delight it was to enter!), otherwise not. Now the shut door was a reminder of and a rebuke to the brothers’ childish, unspeakable desires.

“He’s inside. I know it.”

It was B——’s duty, he supposed, to push the door inward. But he could hardly lift his arm, which was heavy as lead. C——, breathing quickly and shallowly beside him, made a feeble effort to turn the knob.

Somehow, they managed to open the door. Each pushed the palm of his shaking hand against it, and the door swung inward.

There, comfortably lying on a leather chaise lounge, a knitted coverlet spread over his arthritic knees, Dr. A—— was watching television. In his uplifted right hand like a wand he held the black plastic



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remote control. For a long moment, suspended as if the old man had pressed STILL on the control, Dr. A—— stared at his middle-aged twin sons, and his middle-aged twin sons stared at him. No one could speak.

Then Dr. A—— said, with scarcely concealed disgust, “So. You’re too busy to call your elderly widower father, but you’ve come intruding into his house, uninvited. What were you thinking? Hoping? That ‘something had happened to Dad?’”

Both B—— and C—— began to stammer apologies.

“Dad, we thought——”

“Dad, we tried to call you——”

“You hadn’t called us, Dad——”

“We were worried, Dad——”

“We were very w-worried——”

“Sons, go. Leave me. The sight of you revulses me. I don’t doubt you’ve come sniffing around for your inheritances. But you’ve come too soon, by years.”

Dr. A—— lifted the remote control and pressed FAST FORWARD.

The brothers were downstairs in the kitchen, breathless and confused. For a dazed moment B—— couldn’t recall: had they just entered the house? He’d just smashed the back door with the gardening shears? C—— was wiping at his forehead, which was damp and clammy as the skin of a dead man. He removed his glasses to wipe the steamed lenses. It seemed to C—— that their father had forced them out of the master bedroom, yet he couldn’t remember his father actually touching him.

B—— said in a hoarse whisper, “You led me into this! You’ve made a fool of me. Dad will never forgive me.”

C—— protested, “Why is it my fault? You wanted to come here. You broke in the door.”

“You broke in the door. Damn you!”

“You knew! This was a trick you and Dad concocted. To humiliate me.”

“But you kept saying he was dead. You were the one who wanted to take the deer rifle from him.”

“And you were the one who thought we shouldn’t even mention it, though Dad has obviously been suicidal for years.”

“He isn’t suicidal, we just saw him. Didn’t we just see him?”

“We haven’t been upstairs yet, how could we see him?”

“Yes. We’ve been upstairs. He expelled us, he sent us out of the room. He’s furious with us both, and it was your fault.”

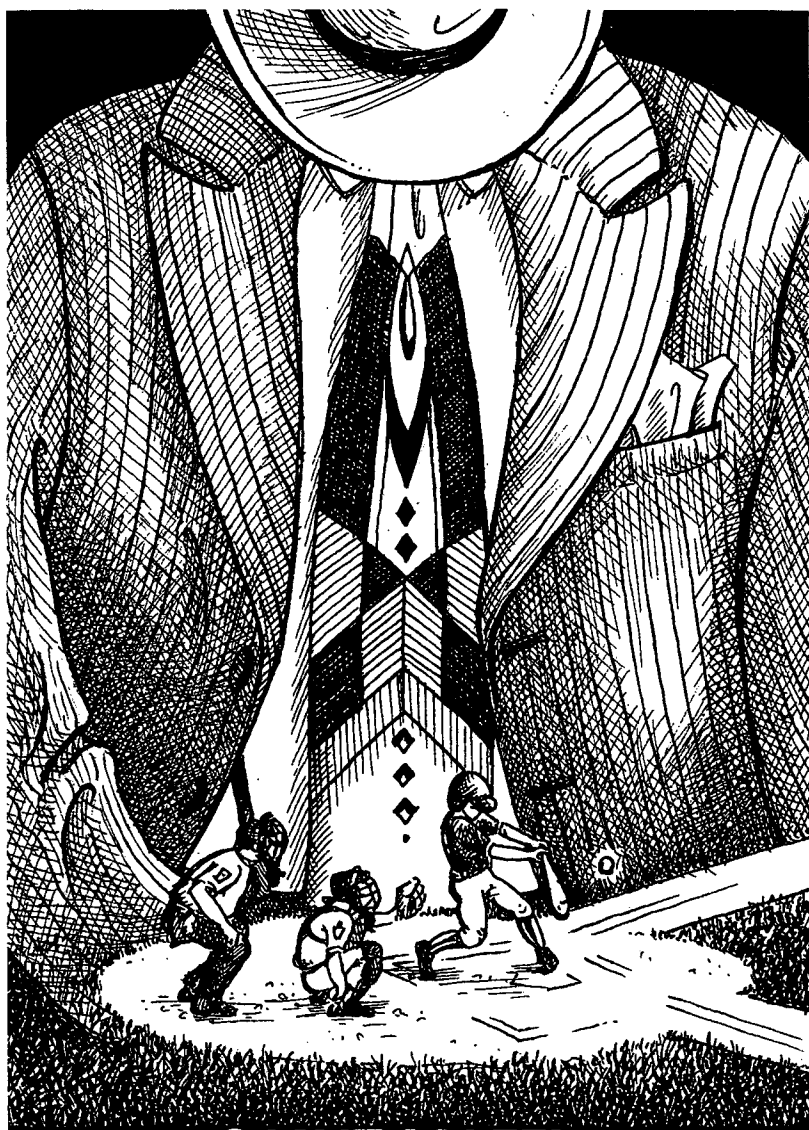
Suddenly the two brothers were quarreling. They took no care if their father could hear them, their voices were young and aggrieved. It might have been the very day, the very hour of their mother’s death. Their grief was fury, their hearts beat like furious fists in their

chest. Tears spilled hotly from their eyes, with a rank salt taste like blood. B— was fumbling to snatch up a steak knife that looked to be about eight inches long out of the stagnant water in the sink. But C—, the more athletic and active of the brothers, with quicker reflexes, yanked open a drawer beside the stove and took out a bread knife of at least ten inches, not sharply honed, rather dull, but adequate for his purposes, for he meant only to defend himself against his crazed elder brother. The knife flashed, stabbing B— about the shoulders and arms, as if it had acquired a demonic life of its own. B— cried, "Stop! No." The brothers struggled like a drunken couple trying to dance. The music in their heads was deafening, the sticky linoleum floor tilted giddily beneath their feet. B—'s hands were suddenly lacerated and slick with blood, but he managed to pick up one of the kitchen chairs, a vinyl-covered metal chair with tubular legs, and he swung it clumsily at C—'s face, which was contorted with hatred. The slippery bread knife went flying, across the Formica-topped table and onto the floor. Both brothers lunged for it. On the TV screen, so accustomed to professionally choreographed knife-fighting scenes, their antics were clumsily, unintentionally comic despite their desire to murder each other; yet they managed to snatch up the knife, each brother's fingers on it, B— was grappling with C—, C— was grappling with B—, the knife flashed and flew in an arc and was brought up with stunning swiftness and finality into the soft abdomen of one of the brothers, as if gutting a fish. The brothers were now slipping in blood. On their hands and knees, slipping in blood. The bread knife was being drawn, sawed, jerkily back and forth across a neck, except the blade wasn't very sharp; an inhuman strength was required.

Quickly, Dr. A— pressed REWIND.

The telephone rang just as B— was glancing up worriedly from *Great Doomed Expeditions: The Yukon*. His wife said, with a smile, "That's your brother." B— said, "I hope not." He meant to be amusing, of course.

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# SAINT MAFFIA AND SOUTH CRAMPTON

I. J. Schecter

**F**eeney raised the bottle—a moment's pause in appreciation of simple pleasures.

"Fine beer," he said, rotating the bottle left and right, a warm smile playing at his mouth. He had called a good game today, he reminded himself. Before him a young man dashed ninety feet and dived into the dirt; unleashed himself toward a belt-high fast-ball, the wood in his grasp flashing like a whip; and leaped to snare a ball traveling silently through the summer air. This experience was a familiar one, and he knew the cruel imbalance between comforts present and glories past was not easily resolved.

He had called a good game. And the day was better for it.

Lumley, he believed, had a shot if any of them did and if he wanted it badly enough. The boy didn't have Feeney's bygone speed, and not quite the bat control, either—but then, Lumley was fourteen. There was time for refinement.

"Fine beer," Feeney repeated, thinking now about very old women who never left their small backwater towns. He asked the beer bottle if it thought he was turning into one of those women.

Before the beer could answer there came a pleasant sound. A knock at the door made him feel good these days.

He didn't recognize the pair of visitors. They seemed to have materialized out of a separate era. The taller one sported a blue-gray suit with chalk pinstripes complemented by brown buck-

skin shoes and a cinnamon-brown fedora with a black band. His partner's suit was gray-blue. Shorty's shoes were white and brown saddle-strap oxfords. Over both pairs of ankles, gray spats were fastened.

"Earl Feeney?" said the smaller of the pair.

"Yes," Feeney said. As his teeth closed on the syllable he was sent reeling by a blow to the jaw. The beer bounced off the floor and rolled.

"Message for you," said the small one as he removed a gray handkerchief from his breast pocket. "Don't be so quick to toss people from the game."

Feeney lay on the floor, his lip bloodied. "Wha—?"

"Clean yourself up."

The hanky floated down and landed on Feeney's stomach as two pairs of buckskins exited through the front door, crossing a trail of beer that disappeared into the kitchen.

Feeney's first notice upon waking was the throb in his jaw. So it hadn't been a dream. He stretched his mouth wide, flexing the swollen area. On his way to the kitchen he plucked the handkerchief from the floor. His fingers absently played against the silk until Feeney reached the freezer, where silk deferred to ice.

Keith Lumley's indignation had still been fresh when Feeney explained the ejection.

"When a player argues with the umpire too long, he gets tossed—at any level."

The boy was silent, meaning he understood Feeney was at least partly correct.

"I know you've got fire—that's good. But you've got to control it." This was maybe a bit much to load upon the kid right after the game, but Feeney was only an umpire, not a coach—opportunities for such sermons were rare, and this was an invaluable lesson. Keith's eyes remained fixed on the ground.

Walking home from the park, protective gear in a bag in one hand, Feeney recalled his first ejection and the incredulous anger he had felt. His teammates were impressed by his ability to kick a helmet clear over the dugout wall; the umpire, a man whose name he could no longer recall, was not.

"Look, Earl," this man had said, "there are only so many scouts that ever come to a place like South Crampton. They see you kicking batting helmets around, they're gonna make themselves forget they ever came."

"PLAY BALL!" Feeney shouted. The bleachers were filled, meaning most of South Crampton was in attendance. One reason was Lumley—there had grown a sense even among the casual fans that he was special with a glove on his hand or a bat in his grip. The other reason was that two events of consequence seldom coincided in South Crampton on a Sunday afternoon.

As the South Crampton Hares jogged out to their positions,

Feeney heard the opening odds being laid on Danny Fantick's inning of retirement. Fantick, a dominating pitcher at eleven and twelve, had been relegated to might-have-been status since tearing his rotator cuff on the afternoon of his thirteenth birthday. During the opening game of the current season, he had withdrawn in the third inning, muttering, "It's over." He returned the following game and retired in the fifth after grounding out. This afternoon's contest was the season's twentieth. Danny took his place at first base.

Feeney's empathy for Danny Fantick added to his distractions. The sad parallel glared against his memory: Fantick, at fifteen, like Feeney, at seventeen, was a natural ballplayer trying to cut it after the Gods of Unfair Injuries had decided otherwise.

In the sixth inning Danny pounded a changeup, wincing on contact, his face becoming that of an old man. The West Gwillimbury left fielder, a wire-thin fourteen-year-old, chased down the ball in left center, diving, rolling, and popping up with the ball nestled in his glove, a grass stain running the length of his pant leg. Danny stopped near first base, jogged back to the dugout, sat, and mumbled, "I'm done. It's over." At the opposite end of the bench Philip Vaughn smiled, knowing he had just won twenty-eight dollars.

Lumley finished the game with four hits. This was not unusual in

itself, however Feeney, walking home, thought maybe it should have been three. He had been certain Lumley's foot beat the ball to first on the slow grounder—

Feeney was shaken from his musings as Nathan Green's pickup passed, sending up clouds of dust on one side of the road. Feeney's hand rose in response to Nathan's; when it lowered again, he found himself challenging the consistency of his balls and strikes. Though he was certain he hadn't called the game in favor of either team, it was strange that the West Gwillimbury Tigers hadn't given the Hares much of a game. They had seemed incapable of stringing together a rally. Even Danny Fantick, resurrected in the eighth, had drawn a crucial walk for the Hares with two outs. Considering the at bat now, Feeney thought he might have called ball four on strike three.

Feeney's reflections were interrupted a second time. Laina Vaughn, trundling along in her pickup, called out to him, offering a ride. In the passenger seat Philip sat counting a small wad of bills. His cap was removed, leaving a knotted mess of sandy-blond hair. In the flatbed, Laina's pink and yellow striped lawn chair rested like a portable throne. As sacred a fixture as the four-foot-high outfield fence, as the train tracks running from right field into the next county, as Danny Fantick's retirement ritual, was Laina Vaughn in her lawn chair beyond third base.

Her knowledge of the game was equal to that of any man in South Crampton, except Feeney himself.

She was special. But Feeney didn't want to waste time convincing himself that a woman like that might take to a man like him. He declined the offer, wished her a pleasant evening, and watched the pickup disappear over a hill.

The knock came this time before he could articulate the quality of his beer to the empty room. Feeney remained in his easy chair, comforted by its thickness. "Come in," he said.

This caller brought with him no partner, and his suit looked like it had been dipped in paint. In his mind Feeney attempted to identify an event or holiday in mid-July requiring costumes. The caller's jacket—bright blue with yellow pinstripes zigzagging across it, its shoulders exaggeratedly padded, its sleeves pegged, its pockets slashed—tapered sharply down to his knees. His trousers, their color matching that of the garish jacket, rode absurdly high. Pleated at the waist and cut wide over the hips, they also tapered narrowly, toward a pair of blue and white saddle shoes whose ends were pointed.

Flamboyant accessories lent accent to the grotesque ensemble: enormous cufflinks; a very long watch fob fastened to the belt loop of his trousers and draped into the pocket; and of greatest oddity



to Feeney, a bright blue hat, striped yellow, whose brim might have been a foot wide.

Feeney placed his beer on the small table. "What can I do for you?"

"I represent a certain party which has an interest in the fairness of baseball games played in South Crampton," said the man. He began to twirl the gold chain. "This party has developed a concern about the results of certain games being unfairly influenced by certain individuals."

"Look, I don't know who you are, but I believe I've already been warned about this, whatever it is, and I didn't toss anyone from the game today—"

The backside of the man's hand snapped across Feeney's cheek, then the opened palm whipped back across. When Feeney's hand went to the spot, the man batted it away and pinched Feeney's nose between the knuckles of his index and middle fingers.

"Hey!"

"Pick a strike zone and use it," the man said, then brought his free hand across Feeney's nose, knuckles releasing their grip an instant before the blow struck. Feeney had seen small children perform this annoying act upon one another—it was only now he discovered how painful it truly was.

The man exited. Unlike the others, he left no handkerchief or instruction for Feeney to clean himself up.

Feeney locked the door, wrapped some ice cubes in a dish-

towel, and placed a long-distance call to his nephew.

"Uncle Earl! How's big ol' South Crampton!"

"You were funnier when you were a kid, Charlie."

"I disagree. Life treating you well?"

"Life's been hitting me in the face a lot."

"So last week this lady hires me to check out her husband—she thought he was cheating, the usual. Always running out, comes home late, secret phone calls, the regular stuff. I follow the guy for a few days, and guess what! He isn't cheating at all, because who has time to cheat when you're running more cocaine than anyone in Philadelphia! I think the wife was *relieved*! Not that it matters—she won't see him much for the next four consecutive twenty-five year periods. How's the weather?"

"Hot and dry."

"Just the way you like it."

"Charlie, do you know anything about guys who dress up like gangsters and rough people up because of Little League baseball games?"

"Why don't you just come live with me in Philly, where it's safe?"

"I'm serious."

"Sounds like Saint Maffia."

"The Mafia?"

"Not the Mafia, no. Let me do some checking."

"How fast can you do that?"

"Almost as fast as you can drink a beer."

Charlie paused. When he spoke again the boyish voice of Earl's

nephew Charlie had vanished, replaced by the sober, discerning tone of Charles Kates, professional detective. When, at five years of age, Charlie had told his Uncle Earl he would be a private eye, Feeney had laughed affectionately, rested the tiny buttocks on his large belly, and said, "Look out, Eliot Ness."

Now the kid was using a fake surname and inadvertently catching cocaine dealers. Feeney couldn't tell cocaine from baking soda if his life depended on it.

"Okay," Charles Kates said. "Start talking."

**E**ven as a working man Feeney had enjoyed Mondays. Early evenings and mornings had become a habit in youth, so he had never developed preferences for one day over another. He had seen good Mondays and bad, perfect ones and those without redeeming, a variation that also affected the rest of the week. And to his current lifestyle, the individual days, apart from Sunday, offered less distinction than they ever had.

Feeney stepped outside and began his morning walk with the sunrise at his back. The roads were his alone.

At the first cross street a pink Studebaker swerved in front of Feeney. As dust settled behind the car a man stepped out and pointed at him. He had come from the same tailor as yesterday's business-clown. Feeney thought to turn and run, but his mind was curi-

ous. The man's suit was bright red with yellow zigzag stripes, the flared jacket revealing another long key chain that looped below his knee. His red-soled yellow chamois bluchers were pointed like Sunday's blue and white saddle-straps had been, and the brim of his yellow hat swept out all around.

When the man pointed at him—a two-fingers-plus-thumb gesture Feeney assumed was intended to symbolize a gun—a large brass ring swung down around the knuckle of his middle finger. As the man turned, a ray of sunlight winked off the center of his chest, and Feeney's gaze was drawn to a tie clip in the shape of a small rifle. The man seemed pleased Feeney had noticed—a grin passed on his face before he slipped back into the car and drove on.

"All right, I've got some information," said Charlie.

The kid was good. It had been less than twenty-four hours.

"When's your next ballgame?"

"Sunday," Feeney replied.

"Next question. Is there any kid in the county who's better than all the others?"

"There's one."

"You know his name?"

"Keith Lumley. He reminds me a bit of myself as a ballplayer—"

"Yep, we're dealing with Saint Maffia."

"So it is the Mafia?"

"No. It's an organization called *Saint Maffia*, for Small Town Maffia, Maffia with two *fs*."

"Two fs?"

"So the real Mafia don't get involved with them."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're a non-Mafia group who operate in a fashion similar to the real Mafia, but without weapons. They run many of the small towns in the States. As far as I can figure, you've drawn their interest."

"What do I have to do with anything?"

"I believe one of the two men who came to see you—the taller one—was Michael 'Scarface' Lumley, Keith's second cousin."

"I didn't see any scars."

"There aren't any. It's just a nickname. I assume he was concerned that by throwing Keith out of the game you might affect his confidence."

"This is a joke, right?"

"It's worth investigating."

"There was another guy," Feeney said. "Yesterday, after the game."

"A second guy?"

"Yeah."

"By himself?"

"Yeah. He slapped me in the nose."

"I might have to make a trip down to South Crampton," Charlie murmured—more, it seemed, to himself than to Feeney.

"What?"

"This second guy, was he dressed the same as the first pair?"

"No. His suit was really big and colorful. And his hat was enormous."

"Shit."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Enormous hat. And otherwise?"

"Otherwise he looked the same, except no hanky."

"Kerchief."

"Then there was a guy this morning in a car who didn't do anything except get out and point at me."

"How did he point at you? With two fingers, pointed like a gun?"

"How did you know that?"

"Was he dressed the same as the man from after the game yesterday?"

"Yeah, with the big jacket and those balloon trousers—"

"It's called a zoot suit."

"And he had a tie clip shaped like a gun."

"What kind of gun?"

"How the hell do I know?"

"Did it look like a short rifle, like gangsters in old movies use?"

"I guess."

"That's probably Pinto Rogers."

"Charlie, what's going on?"

"The gun is called a Tommy gun."

"A what?"

"Tommy gun. Thompson sub-machine gun."

"These guys use guns?"

"Damned Tommies. Twice isn't enough?"

"Charlie?"

"Sorry. Look—Uncle Earl. Come to Philadelphia. There's family here. What is there for you there except that little baseball league?"

"Can we stop talking about Philadelphia and start talking about what I can do about this?"

"Do nothing. Most of all, stay away from the diamond."

"I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?"

"I'm the umpire. You know that."

"Can't you cancel a few games?"

"Without me these boys have no summer!"

"Uncle Earl, promise me you'll figure out something so that you don't have to umpire for the next little while."

"I can't promise that."

Charlie paused. "I don't know if you realize this, but you could be in over your head here. It would be to your benefit to start being less stubborn. I'll be in touch soon."

As Feeney hung up he realized his elbow had commenced its familiar throb dance—a maddening discomfort that would never quite reach a fever pitch but would also never abate fully, like a perpetual cold light rain that hasn't the good sense to wash itself out.

Feeney crumpled the dishtowel in his hand, stood, came set, and delivered. The dishtowel fastball popped out of his palm, unfurled, and sank to the floor. The hand of Feeney's good arm went to his elbow as he cried out, savoring the pain.

It was his reminder.

"Earl! Are you there? It's Laina Vaughn!"

She wore denim shorts and a blouse cropped at the midriff. Feeney doubted many forty-year-olds could boast a stomach as

toned as the one at which he now found himself staring. A red bow was fastened in her hair. In her hands she held a covered pan from which wafted the marvelous scent of blueberries.

"Oh, I was beginning to think you were out," she said. "I made a pie."

Feeney could think of nothing to say.

"You looked so weary after the game yesterday, I thought you could use it."

His gaze dipped again toward the tawny flatness of Laina's stomach.

"Aren't you going to invite a lady in who's baked you a pie?"

"Oh. I . . ."

She passed him, set the pie on the kitchen counter, and began slicing it into even sections.

"Have you ever been to Philadelphia?" Feeney heard himself ask.

Laina licked her finger. "Hm! I do make a good pie! Are you asking to take me to Philadelphia, Earl Feeney?" She exited the kitchen, tousling his hair as she passed a second time. "That has to sit a minute."

"I just wanted to know if you've been," Earl said as he fixed his hair.

"I've never been outside Kansas."

"Really?" Again Feeney found pleasure in his own surprise.

"Have you?"

"No."

"Looks like we're both a couple of homebodies."

"Yeah."

Laina drew a breath. "Anyway . . ." She smiled—nervously, Feeney thought—and approached him. Behind her the scent of blueberries drifted from the kitchen. "I heard someone say you should do one outrageous thing every day. I don't usually. Today I am. I like you, Earl. You probably know that. I like you very much. I came here to ask if you like me. Good Jesus, I feel like a schoolgirl."

He thought to tell her she also resembled one, but instead kept silent. It seemed she had more to say.

"I don't even enjoy watching baseball, truth be told. Half the reason I come to the games is to look at you in that adorable uniform. You could stand to lose a few pounds, but then, who couldn't? Anyway, it's what's inside, right?" She waved an arm about the room. "If you weren't umpiring, I'd probably stay home and stare at maps every Sunday."

"Did you say maps?"

"Yes."

"That's amazing."

"How do you mean?"

"Laina," he began. It seemed the appropriate beginning. "What about—Philip's father?"

"Philip's father is a window washer from Eureka who I met at a state fair. He wanted no part of Philip, and I wanted no part of him." She shrugged, abashed but not apologetic. "A perfect arrangement."

Feeney stared.

"Well, I am now sufficiently embarrassed," she said, her face

rubescient. "Would you like some pie?"

It was not the best blueberry pie he had tasted, but it was warm and without question better than anything he could have baked.

"This is delicious."

"It's not the best I've made."

"Laina—" he began again. This time there seemed further words moving up his throat.

And here they came. "I don't want to sound like I'm crazy, but I think I've had a revelation. I'm not sure if that's the right word. I don't normally have them, but I'm pretty sure this is one. Do you believe in fate?"

"I did, and then I didn't," said Laina. "I don't think about it much now."

Feeney inhaled, recognizing that a speech of some length was poised at the top of his throat. "When I was a kid I ruined my elbow permanently. Before that, I was the best ballplayer in town. Maybe the best in a lot of towns. I don't know, because I never played anywhere except in a few tournaments. I never got to play against kids from the cities—but I felt like it didn't really matter because I knew I could outplay them."

A curious emotionality was stealing over him. It had been years since he had even talked about this.

"I was going to make it all the way. When my elbow blew out, I wanted to die. It wasn't because I didn't think I could do anything

else. It was because I couldn't figure out what I'd done to deserve it. That's the way a kid thinks, right?"

Laina looked down. When Feeney continued, she looked up again, her eyes sympathetic.

"The only way I could deal with the frustration was to rationalize it. I figured there had to be a reason, because I knew it wasn't my fault. What I came up with was that everyone gets one really bad thing and one really good thing to happen to them in their lives. One bad fate, one good fate." Feeney chuckled. "I thought it was pretty philosophical at the time. So I accepted it and waited for my good fate. But it never came." He gazed at her, his eyes tender and cautious. "That was thirty years ago. I'd kind of forgotten about it. Then when you showed up at the door, I had a moment of revelation, if that's what it's called. The last one I remember having is when I figured out the reason for my bad fate."

He looked into her eyes.

"Are you my good fate, Laina?"

She moved to him.

"Well, Earl, I'll tell you what," she said. "I'm going to put my arms around you and then I'm going to squeeze. If it feels like something, you tell me. If it doesn't, you've got a free blueberry pie."

Friday's low clouds had become Saturday's downpour, and the rain had not let up until dawn. Giant puddles around each base had been raked, shoveled, even

ignited; reduced now to shallow pools, they could be avoided by a slight angling while a runner stayed within the limits of the baseline. In the softened outfield grass the last droplets of rain clung, then slid away. The day was decent, if not warm.

"PLAY BALL!" Feeney shouted.

The wooden bleachers—towels, pads and plastic tarps laid across their surface—were filled. Laina Vaughn sat in her lawn chair beyond third base. Some, Nathan Green among them, had chosen the comfort of home over the beauty of a glistening diamond.

One individual was making his first appearance. The small boy—no older than twelve, Feeney guessed—was dressed in a suit and under one arm held a small hat. When he wasn't pacing behind the backstop or observing through the fence, the boy stood nearest Garson Fantick, Danny's father, who also wore a suit. The Fanticks were regular visitors to church, and Feeney was aware that Danny came to the diamond park directly from services. The boy must be a cousin of Danny's from out of town, Feeney assumed. He wondered if the boy could pitch the way Danny had at eleven and twelve.

By the eighth a steady drizzle had begun. Feeney's experience told him this was a shower that wouldn't last more than fifteen minutes. After that the clouds would burn off and admit the sunshine absent from South Crampton much of the past week.

Jogging home from third base

on a single in the bottom of the inning, Keith Lumley slipped on home plate and landed hard against the muck. He assured the coach and his fellow Hares that he was fine, but a fourteen-year-old attempting to conceal a limp was as futile as a sixty-four-year-old doing the same.

When the game was done Feeney went to Laina, her cheeks streaked with rainwater. He did not embrace her; news was passed readily in South Crampton, and even if the town would learn of their romance in time, Laina did not want to prompt questions from Philip.

He could have kissed her without concern. Philip Vaughn sat at one end of the dugout counting a small wad of bills as Feeney had seen him do in the passenger seat of Laina's pickup the week before. Danny Fantick had retired from baseball after popping up in his first at bat and Philip, perhaps having detected a twitch or grimace during warm-ups unnoticed by the others, had predicted correctly for the second week in a row.

Though Garson Fantick had endured, watching his son sulk in the dugout for eight innings, Fantick's little cousin had not. Fearing damage to his suit, perhaps, the boy was gone by the eighth, Feeney recalled, noting the absence as Keith Lumley walked undramatically to the bench.

Knowing she wanted to kiss him was nearly as satisfying as the kiss itself. Laina giggled and

started away. Before she passed, her palm fell upon his arm and she said, "Philip is staying with a friend tonight."

As Earl Feeney walked home that late afternoon along the wet roads under new sunlight, his equipment bag in one hand, he found himself awash with a strange feeling. He felt very much his age, and his age to him felt suddenly a very natural thing as well, but he also felt rather young, a feeling confirmed by the foolish grin on his face.

Seated in Feeney's easy chair was the boy he had guessed was Danny Fantick's cousin. He had been right about one thing: the little pinstriped suit was dry.

The boy rose out of the chair—Feeney saw now that his young features might belie a true age of sixteen—and tipped his little black hat, which was rounded at the crown. Feeney glimpsed suspenders checked with a plaid pattern under the gray jacket.

"Bad news, I'm afraid, Mr. Earl Feeney."

Feeney sighed. It was a dream, after all—one of those that occupied nearly the entire night. It was a regrettable certainty. He thought he might be falling in love, and this sensation, even in a dream, was unique.

He placed his equipment bag on the floor and entered the kitchen. Dream or not, he would need a beer before indulging this new character.

He twisted the cap off and approached the boy.



"Look, kid, I don't know how old you are, but I know it's not old enough to be hanging around with a bunch of guys who think they're the Maf—"

Oxygen left Feeney as the small fist drove itself into his stomach. The beer slipped from his grasp and shattered on the floor.

"You little—"

The second blow landed beside and above the first. Feeney's rib cage seemed to collapse upon itself. A third punch repeated the second. Gasping, Feeney lunged. The boy sidestepped him, and Feeney sprawled onto his chest.

"Because you had to be mister macho umpire and make those boys play in the rain, Keith Lumley had to visit the hospital. I hope you're real happy about that."

Feeney, clutching his stomach, had rolled onto his back. As he drew breath a bolt of pain raced across his side. "Who the hell—"

"Call me Junebug. Now listen up, and listen good, 'cause you're obviously not real good at hearing something the first time. This happens again, it ain't gonna be one of those kids who ends up in the hospital. Understand?"

Desperately Feeney swiped at the boy, who stumbled and in reflex kicked out. His shoe caught Feeney's nose squarely.

As he felt consciousness receding, the pungent taste of blood registered in Feeney's mind.

"Shoot," said the boy. "Why'd you make me do that? Now they're gonna ask where this is." He reached inside his jacket and

produced a white handkerchief. It floated down and landed on Feeney's face, covering his eyes.

"It's too bad for stupid people they aren't smarter," he heard the boy mutter.

Then Feeney was out.

"Christ, Uncle Earl, I told you not to umpire today!"

Though the ice seemed only to intensify the pain in his nose, Feeney held it firm.

"I didn't think you were that serious."

"Didn't think I was serious? What else do I have to say!"

"All right, all right."

Charlie's tone relaxed. "You were . . . um, beaten up . . . by Archie Tennyson—goes by the name of Junebug Sacks. An apprentice. You might have noticed he was probably wearing a derby instead of a fedora. The shorter brim is to indicate lower status."

"Good punch for a kid."

"He wasn't supposed to hit you. You must have challenged him."

"Challenged him!"

"I'm sorry, Uncle Earl, but it doesn't seem you're making this very easy for yourself. There are two issues here. One involves Keith Lumley. Saint Maffia have some very substantial money riding on his chances to make it all the way. If he does, a significant . . . bonus comes through, with which they'll gain the resources to expand."

"I'm getting a headache."

"Expansion is part of the second issue. These smaller groups, like the ones trying to edge into

South Crap—sorry, Crampton—can be squashed with those kinds of numbers. You remember your second visit—that man who told you to pick a strike zone and use it? His group likely didn't even have any stake in that game. They just wanted to show you they could rough you up the same as Saint Maffia. This group, they're called the Tommies. They all wear Tommy gun tie clips and point in that stupid two-fingers-and-thumb manner. Saint Maffia will always give up their kerchiefs if they're forced to strike you and you bleed. Except it's considered an act of shame to show up without one's kerchief—violence is condoned only as a last resort. That's why I'm suggesting it's curious you've been kerchiefed twice now."

"Kerchiefed?"

"Hit to the point of bleeding."

"How about speaking in my language instead of theirs?"

"You really have to think before you act, Uncle Earl."

"I'm sorry you think I'm asking for this, Charlie, but I've been umpiring ballgames in this town for—"

"I'm coming down. Tonight—before you get yourself in real trouble. There's an abandoned church near a farm in the west end of town—which is about a mile from the east end, of course . . ."

"You can't come tonight."

"I'm coming tonight."

"I have plans."

"Break them. The farm is owned by a Nathan Green. I as-

sume you know him. Meet me at that church at eleven thirty. I'm going to catch the eight o'clock flight into Topeka and drive down from there. I can't believe there's no airport closer than Topeka."

"Charlie, you don't need to—"

"Eleven thirty, Uncle Earl."

"Why the church?"

"One, I've got a reputation to maintain. The fewer people see me, the better. Two, you still don't seem to understand that some dangerous people may be looking for you. I'd say a man's home is a good place to look for him."

Feeney didn't reply.

"Eleven thirty. And try not to umpire any games between now and then, for Christ's sake."

As Feeney glanced at his watch, the hands telling him it was nearly seven, he was startled by the sound of the doorbell. As he lowered the dishtowel a handful of cubes spilled out and clattered onto the floor.

"Mr. Feeney, sir? You home?"

Feeney was unable to place the voice.

"Mr. Feeney? Hello?"

Cautiously he swung the door open. On the front step stood Philip Vaughn, his tangle of sandy-blond hair poking out from underneath a Royals cap. In one hand Philip held an envelope; the other supported a small mud-caked bicycle.

"Hey, Mr. Feeney. My mom asked me to give this note to you. She says she heard you were asking around for directions on how to make a blueberry pie. She

makes 'em the best. Recipe's inside. I was just on my way somewhere, so she asked if I'd drop it off."

"Well," Feeney replied. "Thank you, Philip."

"You bet, Mr. Feeney. See you Sunday!" Philip mounted his bicycle, and in a moment was pedaling away, his rear end a foot above the seat.

Feeney opened the seal and pulled out a single sheet of plain lined paper. On it was written a short note. The faint scent of perfume delighted him as he brought the letter closer.

*Come by at eight, it read. You've probably eaten dinner. I hope you have room for dessert.*

*Laina*

After reading the letter back over twice more, Feeney remembered the appointment with his pompous nephew. He stuffed the note into his pocket and stepped briskly outside, pulling the door closed behind.

**H**e pressed the bell a third time and placed his ear against the door. "Laina, it's Earl!" He cupped a hand around each eye and peered through the window. The house was dark.

He thought to leave a return note on the reverse of her invitation, but the only instrument he carried on him was the yellow umpire's counter he had owned forever. Walking along a quiet road in the evening, he liked to rotate the wheels, his thumb working all three with rapid pre-

cision, the distinct clicks a soothing, familiar tune.

From one of his pockets he pulled out the letter; from the other, his counter. Looking back and forth between the letter and counter, Feeney saw no manner in which one could be written upon with the other.

He started back home.

It was just past seven, and Laina Vaughn was preparing a chestnut apple crumble whose aroma now began to fill her nostrils. Another half hour would do, leaving twenty minutes for primping.

She had felt somewhat guilty about using Philip as an unwitting messenger for the delivery of a love letter. All the same, such games, she was finding, never lost their irresponsible joy.

She adjusted the oven a degree or two, then paused to draw a long whiff, smiling in admiration of her work. She anticipated telling Earl this was a recipe passed down through four generations, a creation of Laina's great-grandmother and one that would someday be passed to her own daughter. This latter comment would be intended in part to gauge his reaction to the mention of children and, by implication, the notion of marriage. By the calendar less than a week had passed. Her heart ignored those kinds of practical measures, however, declaring rather that the feelings had always been there, lying dormant until stirred. She chose to believe her heart, and believe it she d—

Suddenly a palm clamped itself over her mouth and an arm slipped around her torso. When her voice, in a reflex of fear, uttered a response, the arm jerked backward.

"All right, let's take it nice and easy, 'cause nobody needs to get hurt."

Laina struggled, her legs dancing uselessly.

"Didn't you hear what I said, little lady? You got pie wax in your ears or somethin'? Now c'mon—we're gonna go for a little ride. Gonna do some prayin' to the big guy. I'm gonna take my hand away now. You make one sound, it's gonna upset me some-thin' awful. Got that?"

Her limbs stopped.

"Okay." Slowly the hand removed itself.

"Who—"

"Name's Mister, to you," he said and tipped his enormous red hat. He drew the back of his forearm across his brow. His other arm remained at her side.

For a moment Laina's alarm turned to amusement. Everything about the man's outfit was big and bloused and bright. She had never seen a suit—bright red with yellow zigzagging stripes—of such color, or accessories—an extremely long keychain, severely pointed yellow shoes, a giant yellow hat—of such extravagance. She was relieved, upon realizing a derisive grin had emerged, to find that the man's eyes were shielded by the kerchief he continued to dab at his forehead.

"Man, it's warm in here," he said, stuffing the kerchief back into his pocket. "Whatcha cookin' there, fire?"

As Feeney dialed he held the letter against his nose, one side of which remained slightly purple. *Junebug*, he recalled and laughed. With the scent of Laina's perfume in his nose and the sound of her telephone ringing in his ear, there were few matters of weight.

No answer came. Feeney checked the time again—it was nearly eight o'clock—and went to the kitchen, leaving Laina's note by the phone. Feeney put a cold beer bottle to his nose and held it there. He hoped Laina would not think the injury grotesque—to her tanned, toned stomach, a purple, bent nose was laughable in comparison. He peeked down past the bottle. Three minutes past eight. He dialed again, then swigged.

As the rings continued he picked up the note and read over it again.

*Come by at eight. You've probably eaten dinner. I hope you have room for dessert.*

Had she intended a different night?

Eight in the morning?

Perhaps she had planned another baking surprise for him and had realized an ingredient was missing, necessitating a trip to the market. Or she didn't have the right outfit and was shopping for a new summer dress.

The thought of Laina search-

ing for a new dress alerted Feeney to the fact that he was still in his umpire's outfit—gray polyester pants and a powder blue T-shirt with a crest of certification sewn onto one sleeve. Though Laina's attraction to this uniform was flattering (and puzzling), he saw that it was inappropriate for tonight. He hung up the telephone and placed the bottle beside it, then hurried upstairs.

Feeney stood at Laina's door smoothing out the creases in his only vest. It was already quarter of nine when he had left. He was now an hour late.

On the way Feeney had remarked to himself that it was an unfortunate hour for rushing. On the horizon the sun blazed magnificently, inviting his wishes or inquiries. Walking along this road, he had often been given to wondering precisely where that horizon lay. On certain days it might seem as close as the next county; on others, as distant as Colorado. If he concentrated he could sometimes persuade himself he was peering at the West Coast, or perhaps across the ocean, gazing toward a Japanese man also on his way to meet a lady, a man having paused to consider the splendid late morning.

Perhaps he ought to be carrying a bunch of flowers or box of chocolates, Feeney thought. Just as quickly the thought was forgotten, as he realized no one was coming to the door.

He opened the screen door and knocked loudly. The narrow space between door and frame had gone unnoticed while Feeney mused about the horizon. The door now swung back with his knocking.

He stepped inside to the overwhelming scent of baked apples. "Laina?"

He entered the kitchen. The oven door, like the front door, rested open a crack. Inside, an unusual pie, or something of the sort, had collapsed into its own middle. The dial on the display above indicated that the ruined pie continued to cook at three hundred fifty degrees. Though his baking knowledge was limited, Feeney was sure that when a pie or anything that resembles one deflates, one does not continue to bake it at three fifty.

He switched the dial off. His curiosity had become concern. Concern sometimes had a reason behind it, and this reason sometimes demanded action, or at the very least, decision. At calling balls and strikes Earl Feeney was adroit. At hitting and throwing and catching them, he had been superb. Unrelated decisions often floated in his mind for hours.

"Laina!" He walked to the living room—his instinct was to run, but running would be the first concession of alarm, if only to himself—then checked the remaining rooms.

As he started back toward the front door the toe of his shoe sent something skating across the linoleum. He rushed over and

grabbed the small object from the floor. Its shape was unrecognizable, but from the fine gold backing he identified it as an earring. He turned the object over and concern became panic.

It was not an earring, but a tie clip in the shape of a short rifle, or Tommy gun.

Since dragging her from her bungalow and shoving her into the passenger seat of the pink Studebaker, the man had uttered nothing apart from an obscene complaint about the condition of South Crampton's roads. Wherever they were headed, she thought, this was an unusual way of getting there. South Crampton's main roads were far from well maintained, but they were surely superior to this path, a hardy combination of dirt and gravel that skirted the edge of town.

"Where are we going?" Laina said, speaking partly to break her own anxious silence.

"Your boyfriend's got a church meeting tonight with his nephew. You and me are gonna surprise him."

"Am I a hostage?"

"You betcha."

"What for?"

"You shouldn't ask so many questions. Could get you in trouble."

"Aren't I already in trouble?"

"Let's just say you're my insurance for a transfer of ownership."

"Ownership of what?"

The man turned toward her for the first time and grinned.

"This town."

Feeney was only mildly hopeful as he ran from Laina's toward the South Crampton sheriff's office. Nathan Green, whose raspy voice might not be heard to sound ten words in a month, was South Crampton's acting sheriff, and for all the problems he had rectified in twenty-five years of duty, he might as easily have been a ghost.

There were few serious problems one might encounter to begin with, of course, and though Feeney had always concealed his antipathy for the man, he supposed Nathan might have been partly responsible, in an inconspicuous way, for maintaining the town's peace. An amusing thought occurred to Feeney as he closed the gap between Laina Vaughn's bungalow and Nathan Green's office. Perhaps South Crampton, in all that time, had never seen a disturbance. Though an outrageous idea, Feeney found himself more willing to believe it than to imagine Nathan having subdued any problem.

It was amazing, he finally concluded, but true—South Crampton, in twenty-five years, had not witnessed a single threat. The revelation helped to ease him. Situations such as this must surface often, each with ordinary, predictable explanations. He expected that Nathan or his deputy would tell Feeney much of what he had now realized himself. He would accept these words, return home, and await

Laina's call. She had an ailing cousin, he remembered now, in Pepperlaw, an hour north. Perhaps she had had to rush off without first thinking to remove the Apple Something.

Nathan Green, however, did not offer Feeney these or similar reassurances, nor did his deputy.

The sheriff's office lay in darkness.

Dirt and gravel had given way to dirt alone. The Studebaker rolled along more smoothly, an occasional lurch piercing the silence into which the man had again lapsed after their brief exchange. Laina squinted against the sun's hard glare as it sank toward the horizon. Her hair and skin felt dry, her throat irritated. Clouds of swirling dust followed the Studebaker on all sides.

"I'm a little warm," she said.

The man turned and leered. "I'd say you're hot."

"Can we turn the air on or something?"

"Look, lady, I got no issue with you. So just sit there and keep quiet—"

Suddenly out of the dust a silver Cadillac came screeching to a halt in front of the Studebaker. The man slammed his foot against the brake and threw the gearshift into reverse. Laina looked back over her shoulder as the Studebaker peeled backward. There another silver Cadillac stood, blocking its rear. As the Studebaker stopped dead, spewing a tall plume of dust, the doors

of both Cadillacs swung open.

"Crap," said the man.

As rings—distinctly less tuneful than those produced by Laina's number—trilled through the receiver, Feeney noticed the half-finished beer resting on the small table and grabbed it.

"Kipling Regional Emergency," said a voice.

"Hi . . ."

"You got trouble there, sir?"

"I don't know where someone is."

"You want to report a missing person?"

"Yes."

"How long has he or she been missing?"

"Over two hours. I was supposed to see her at eight o'clock."

"That's only about an hour and a half, sir."

"I called her around seven, and I know she hasn't been home since."

"All right, now, we can't report someone missing until a period of twenty-four hours has elapsed—"

"I think she's been kidnapped."

"Where you calling from, sir?"

"South Crampton."

There was no reply.

"Hello?"

"Sir, I beg your pardon, but no one in South Crampton's stolen a stick of gum in close to thirty—"

"She was kidnapped by a gang called the Tommies. I found one of their tie clips in her house and the oven was left on—"

"Can't understand you, sir," said the voice. Rolls of static, which Feeney thought sounded



verbally manufactured, began to interrupt the exchange. "Must be a bad connection, sir . . . sorry, didn't get your name . . . have to call back . . ."

There was a click, followed by a dial tone.

He dialed again. A different operator responded. "Kipling Regional Emergency."

"I'm calling about a woman who's been kidnapped."

"Okay, now. I want you to remain calm and tell me the name of the person."

"Laina Vaughn. I went to see her earlier and found a flat pie in her oven, which had been cooking way too long, then I found a tie clip in the shape of a Tommy gun—"

"Hello?"

"What?"

"Hello? You there, sir?"

"Yes, I'm here. Weren't you listening to—"

"Can you hear me? Hello? I believe the line's gone dead, sir."

Another click. Feeney slammed his beer onto the table; suds jumped out of the bottle and landed on his wrist.

He dialed Charlie's number in Philadelphia. He didn't expect an answer—Charles Kates, he assumed, was as prompt as he was arrogant and would already be on his way to South Crampton, connecting grudgingly out of Topeka.

He was greeted by Charlie's recorded voice. "Hi, Charles Kates, here. I'm absent for the moment, but let me know who you are and what's on your mind,

and I'll get back to you just as soon as I can."

Feeney hung up and swigged from the warm beer. When the bottle was empty he pulled Laina's letter, still redolent with her perfume, from his corduroy pants. He rested the letter against his forehead, imagining her in her pink and yellow striped lawn chair beyond third base, sitting gracefully and sponging the sunshine of a pleasant Sunday afternoon.

He did not recall an inclination to doze; exhaustion of one's alternatives seemed a powerful opiate. As he shook away the fog of sleep the scent of perfume startled him. Laina's note lay on his belly.

The evening had cooled little. What humidity had thinned since morning had taken with it the merciful breeze, leaving a bloated, indolent blanket. Feeney, asleep more than an hour, had sweat copiously in his corduroy and suede. He wanted to change, but Nathan Green's farm lay at the opposite end of town, and while Charlie had not exaggerated much in estimating South Crampton's width to be one mile, he had exaggerated some. The distance was actually twice that, and since two o'clock Feeney's legs had already squatted for nine innings before thrice covering the distance between his home and Laina's, with a detour to the absent sheriff's included. He would need a half hour to reach the church.

He tried Laina's number a final time.

No answer came.

He rushed past the kitchen and out the front door. His elbow, immobile more than an hour, rippled low pain as Feeney threw the door closed and broke into a run.

**N**athan's farm, in the shadow of a summer evening, was a decrepit thing. Feeney seldom found himself in this end of town and thus owned tenuous evidence for such opinions, but he could not help questioning Nathan's commitment to his land, and a man who had no concern for his land was, to Feeney's thinking, less of a man.

Feeney continued on in a flat-heeled jog, breathing hard. The old church, as desolate as Nathan's farm appeared to be, stood a hundred yards farther up the narrow road. Feeney had been inside once, long ago, to witness the marriage of a friend who had moved immediately following the ceremony to Long Island. Two words, Feeney remembered thinking as he tossed handfuls of rice at the giggling couple. Long Island. South Crampton. How different could they be? And though he still believed any towns with such similar names were in essence the same, Long Island seemed like a place he wanted to go with Laina. Tulsa was another. And all others whose names he had heard in passing or whose glows he had perceived on the

horizon. Together they ought to see every place on earth.

He had run to Laina's once again with the firm expectation that she would not be awaiting him. Feeney was new to helpless worry, and knew no guide other than instinct. It seemed befitting of the situation—for Laina had followed the same guide in revealing her affections, albeit under the pretense of blueberry pie.

During his search of the bungalow he imagined himself with her in his home not a week earlier, poring over the enormous map collection he had been assembling since junior high.

As she crouched on her knees and felt carefully through the pile, Feeney had noticed a spot of blueberry on the corner of her mouth. He reached toward her face and she turned her gaze up toward him. Grinning, he wiped his thumb over the spot, smearing blueberry onto her lips. She released the pile of maps.

"Oops," he said, and chuckled, his thumb paused at the corner of her mouth. The giggles disappeared as Laina, smiling, took his wrist in her grasp.

In darkness he moved down the aisle toward the crucified silhouette looking sadly either in his direction or in the direction of someone nearby. Below the silhouette a row of heads were outlined. The Apostles, he recalled dubiously, a mural of solemn reverence. Feeney reached into his pocket and placed his palm over the counter. As he progressed, his

thumb began to work the wheels. Their steady clicks, amplified against the dark silence, calmed him.

Between Nathan's and the church he had neglected to check the time, but he recalled that it had been after eleven when he ran from Laina's. It might not yet be eleven thirty—Feeney had sustained his labored jog the entire distance, a feat confirmed by the large circle of sweat near his stomach.

As his panting began to slacken, Feeney raised his arm and rotated his wrist, attempting to catch the watch face in lighter shadow. He could distinguish the face but not the position of its arms. He rested a hand on the ledge of one of the pews. The disagreeable sensation of thick, ancient dust repelled his touch. He began toward the pulpit, wondering where the lights might be.

"Stop."

The voice was not his nephew's. Feeney's hand released the counter and pulled itself out of his pocket.

"Who's there?" Feeney said.

The church was suddenly illuminated.

To his left, at one end of the front pew, stood two men in pin-stripes, one a foot taller than the other. It was the pair who had first visited to warn him against ejecting Keith. Charlie had mentioned the name of the larger one—Scarface Lumley, Keith's overprotective second cousin.

Below the mournful figure of Christ a dozen more stood, a por-

trait of blue-gray and gray-blue plain or pinstriped suits, fedoras, and buckskins with spats fastened over them. These were hardly Apostles, and their faces something other than solemn or reverential.

At the front corner of the pulpit a man stood with his hands crossed behind his back. From the breast pocket of his tan jacket protruded a bright royal blue handkerchief fashioned in a stylish fold. The brim of his brown fedora, dipped down in front and turned up in back, hid most of his face. Tan gloves flared at the wrist covered his hands.

"Earl?"

It was Laina's voice, from behind the man.

"Laina!"

As Feeney dashed up the aisle, the pair from the end of the front pew raced across to intercept him. He increased his pace, as did the pair, Scarface Lumley leading. Feeney reached the end of the aisle and banked right, but hands swiped at his ankles and he sprawled before the pulpit. He looked up, glimpsing Laina's face. The man with the royal blue kerchief shifted a step, blocking his view. Scarface Lumley placed a knee on the small of Feeney's back and applied pressure.

"All right, Earl," said the man concealing Laina. His voice was like sandpaper. "Take it easy. The lady's fine." He moved to the side, revealing her. Her arms were bound to the chair. She was wearing an apron.

"Earl, I'm so sorry."

He strained to view her. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Really. Your nephew is very sweet."

"What?"

The man with the royal blue handkerchief nodded to Scarface Lumley, who removed his knee from Feeney's back.

"That hero stuff ain't gonna wash, okay?" The man reached toward his pocket. Feeney expected to be offered the handkerchief for his new collection. Instead the man only adjusted his silk flower, pulling expertly at its folds then poking it a little deeper into the pocket.

Of course—Feeney was not bleeding. No blood, no hanky.

"Now I understand why you were kerchiefed twice," a voice chuckled. Feeney stood and glanced the way of the chuckle. A younger man approached him and pulled off silk gray gloves fastened with buttons before spreading his arms in a gesture of fellowship. Over his handsome olive suit a medium gray fly-front overcoat hung. Beneath the overcoat a high starched collar stood above extra-wide lapels, a gold collar pin resting in the eyelets. His accessories above and below were of equal flair—the former a brown fedora, its band olive green, the latter a pair of plain brown buckskins protected by gray spats. Ends of a gray silk scarf hung down on either side of his neck.

Under these garments Charlie's boyish features seemed illusory. But Feeney could not mistake the face. His nephew had

grinned at him the same way as a child.

"Always the stubborn cowboy." As Charlie crossed the first section of pews, Scarface Lumley's diminutive partner passed him a silk umbrella. "Seems we need to chitchat, wouldn't you say?"

"Charlie?"

"Well, yes—but in these clothes, Kerchief Kates. See, I've never needed to kerchief anyone. Meaning I've always got my kerchief. So it's an ironic nickname." Charlie opened the left side of his overcoat. In the breast pocket of his suit jacket stood a cream kerchief patterned with oblique green stripes, its point more pronounced than the other man's, its fold of a different style. "Anyway, enough small talk. Uncle Earl, I know this is something you probably don't approve of, but if you wouldn't be so heavy on this umpire's integrity bit—which is admirable, of course, don't get me wrong—you'd never have needed to know. Anyway, I think it's better that you do know. As I've already explained to Miss Vaughn here, I can set you both up in Philadelphia with a nice little place in a very small, very quiet area and no financial worries for the rest of your—"

"You're running a gangster operation?"

Charlie seemed stung by Feeney's choice of words. He smiled. "Let's sit."

"Untie Laina."

"Miss Vaughn is in no discomfort."

Feeney looked toward Laina,

who smiled in apology. "I'm okay, Earl. Listen to what he's got to say."

He sat in the first pew. Charlie sat next to him.

"No one can get by on a detective's salary. Believe me—I tried for months. The Saint Maffia are not gangsters. We never use weapons or injure anyone permanently. We certainly would never kill anybody. We merely keep the peace in some little towns across the country. South Crampton hasn't experienced any real crime in almost three decades. Is that so bad?"

"If you've been running South Crampton, what do we need a sheriff for?"

"Connections," said the man with the royal blue kerchief, and raised the brim of his fedora. Cloaked in elegant tans and browns, and as bizarre to Feeney's eyes as Charlie's appearance had been, was the withered face of Nathan Green.

"Nathan has managed our Kansas towns for twenty-five years."

Nathan smiled at Earl. "Never was much of a farmer."

"Now here's our situation, Uncle Earl. One—we're very hopeful, as an organization, that Keith Lumley makes it all the way up through the system. You might say we're banking on it." The short man standing with Scarface Lumley chuckled. Charlie turned in his direction. The chuckling ceased.

"Two—in order to increase the chances of this progression, I've

made some contacts with certain individuals at certain levels of influence."

"Payoffs?"

"Payoffs is an unfortunate word used by people who don't know any different. What you're thinking of as payoffs are just equitable business transactions. Where was I?"

"Three," Nathan said, and recrossed his hands in front of him.

"Right. Three—one of the ways in which Keith might not be successful is if his confidence were reduced to a point where he simply didn't care to play the game any longer. Or if he were to become exceedingly frustrated by the . . . constraints placed upon him by those officiating the game."

"I've heard enough, Charlie. Now untie Laina and go back—"

"Four—it is my belief that you love the game which Keith plays so well to the extent that you would place fairness in its competition above all else—which means if you believe a kid deserves to be tossed from the game, he's going to get tossed. For his own good, I realize. Or if a game is going to be rained out, it's going to be rained out, not drizzled out. This belief is correct, is it not?"

It was Feeney's unbreakable policy not to call a game until drizzle became rain. There was no such thing as a drizzle-out. Not a hundred years ago, and not n—

"Which in turn means you're not about to change your style of umpiring on account of some—

thing so foolish as a huge amount of money. But there is a difference between being smart and being stubborn. Luckily Keith only pulled his groin because of your real-men-play-through-the-rain stunt yesterday. I don't know much about medicine, but I'm pretty sure a pulled groin, if pulled further, can become a torn groin, and as far as I know, a torn groin doesn't heal overnight. We can't chance that possibility, of course. Hence my solution. As I said, I've already run this by Miss Vaughn, and she thinks it's a terrific idea."

"Now I never said terrific," said Laina.

"My apologies, Miss Vaughn. A man should never distort the words of a lady. What was it you did say?"

She gazed at Feeney. "I said I could think of worse things than retiring to Philadelphia with you."

Feeney was stunned and exhilarated.

"Philip would adjust. I think South Crampton may be a little small for a boy his age, anyhow."

"Here's the other thing, Uncle Earl. The Tommies have tried muscling in on our territory a few times, but now they appear to be more serious. We can't help it if they're not smart enough to quit. As you know, they even go as far as to dress and act like us, swaggering around in those zoot suits. They're just bullies—and not even good ones. Also, they know squat about discretion. One of them tried to get to Miss Vaughn

earlier. Luckily, Scarface and Shorty were also on their way to see her, so nothing came of the situation. It was a close call."

"Where is he?"

"Who?"

"The guy who tried to kidnap Laina."

"It's been taken care of."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means the woman you love is safe."

Feeney remembered the tie clip and fished it from his pocket. "I found this—"

"That must have fallen off when I was struggling," Laina said.

Charlie continued. "Word's already getting out. When you tried calling the police earlier—sorry, I had to put a tap on your phone—both operators hung up because you mentioned the Tommies. They don't want any part of this."

"You *tapped* my phone?"

"I had Nathan take care of it while you were umpiring yesterday. I had a feeling you'd go, even though I told you not to. While we're on the subject, let me introduce you to South Crampton's new head umpire."

The smallest of the Apostles stepped forward. Feeney recognized the rounded, short-brimmed hat and plaid suspenders. It was the boy who had knocked him unconscious following repeated stomach blows—wasted beer number two.

"Junebug Sacks, Earl Feeney. I believe you two know each other. Junebug shows great promise,

Uncle Earl, but he's got a bit of a temper. I'm hoping a summer or two of umpiring Little League baseball will help him develop a cooler head."

Unwilling to make eye contact either with Feeney or with Kerchief Kates, Junebug thumbed at the brim of his derby. Only now did Feeney notice he had not yet been awarded spats.

"New head umpire?" Feeney said.

"You've put in your time, Uncle Earl. I'm giving you a trouble-free life with a wonderful lady, and baseball in South Crampton won't suffer in the lea—"

"If a hit ball lands fair beyond first base then rolls foul into the drainage ditch and past the right-field fence, what's the call?" Feeney asked, addressing Junebug Sacks.

"Okay, Uncle Earl, we get the picture."

"It's a foul ball," Feeney said.

"Yeah, yeah," said Junebug Sacks. "Foul ball."

"Ground rule double, you stupid elf," Feeney said.

"Now nobody expects Junebug to master every obscure rule in baseball right away—"

"Men on first and second, one out, batter swings and misses at strike three, catcher drops the ball, then throws wild to first, runners advance one base, batter makes it to first. Your call?"

Junebug looked at Kerchief Kates.

"You're right, Nephew. He'll make a hell of an umpire. Sorry—head umpire."

"The batter is ruled out," Laina said as Junebug's mouth began to form the words "Foul ball?" "And the runners advance safely." Feeney smiled.

"This is a very enjoyable game, you two, but I'm on a schedule. Uncle Earl, you have my sincere promise that by next April Junebug will be the best umpire in . . . what the hell is this called?"

"Kipling Region," Nathan rasped.

"Kipling Region. Now I'm going to ask you one more time. Please come to Philadelphia, where it's safe. Consider it a retirement gift."

Feeney thought of his collection of maps, of the gentle way Laina dug through them, tirelessly identifying places she had dreamed of in childhood.

In his memory she laid her finger on a special place, one she said had always been her paradise even though she knew nothing about it. Her finger rested there awhile, and in her eyes something sparkled, telling him to memorize the moment.

"Afraid I can't do that, Charlie," Feeney said.

When Laina had knelt among the maps and placed her finger upon Victoria, British Columbia, Feeney had only a vague awareness of it. Before he was able to ask, she was explaining her fascination with the city. It rested above the Strait of Juan de Fuca, not only her favorite strait but also her favorite geographical name. Isolated at the southern tip of Vancouver Island, it looked



to be an equidistant stone's throw from Seattle or Vancouver, both mainland centers near mountains. She had never seen mountains, she said and gazed at Feeney with longing.

"What do you mean, you can't do that?" Charlie said.

"You're my brother's son, Charlie, and so I guess I love you. Just the same, I don't want to live anywhere near you. We're different. I don't think I'm the Philadelphia type. If you have all the influence you say you do, it shouldn't matter where we go."

"Then exactly what type are you?"

"Victoria," Feeney said.

Feeney watched his wife and son walking toward the dock. The lake, he had told Philip, would be frozen in a month or less. Philip had used the small outboard every night for two weeks.

Feeney laid his beer on the counter and walked onto the front porch, losing himself among the raspberry bushes. Soon he returned carrying a small basket. Laina's chestnut apple crumble, a recipe four generations old, was a creation without parallel. Surely the same result could be achieved with raspberries.

He began to pluck them.

Nineteen hundred miles south-east, South Crampton's new head umpire, a young man with the peculiar name of Archie Tennyson,

called a ground rule double as a gleaming white baseball skipped into the drainage ditch beyond right field. The Kipling Region Baseball League had been furnished with hundreds of such balls, as well as a variety of bats for each of the four teams, professional bases, a scoreboard, new uniforms and cleats, and a free meal at the A&W for each player following every game.

The young man, wearing polyester gray pants and a powder blue shirt with a Level I Crest of Certification sewn onto the sleeve, pointed the batsman to second base with one arm and with the other waved home Keith Lumley, who had been standing on second. From the on-deck circle, Danny Fantick strode toward the plate.

As the evening cooled, a low throb rose from somewhere deep in Feeney's elbow and began to spread blindly over the joint. A light wind, carrying a hint of autumn, stirred the lake. Feeney peered toward Laina, who sat dangling her feet over the edge of the dock. She turned. Philip sped by in the outboard and shouted enthusiastically, the pink glow of dusk splashed behind him on the horizon like something thrown wildly across an easel.

In the manner of a schoolgirl Laina grinned and waved. Feeney waved back. It was a fine moment.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Archive

Camera obscura. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 139.

FICTION

# BAD, GOOD, AND NO LUCK

Ben Satterfield



*Illustration by Dan Krovatin*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/02*

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**F**rom a straight section of highway as empty and gray as a worthless life, a naced Cadillac sedan glided onto an exit ramp and entered a two-laned street that led downtown. The street, poorly maintained and reluctantly used by suburban motorists, bisected a run-down area called "no man's land" by the commuters who avoided it. Condemned and spectral buildings with caved-in roofs and missing windows hovered on each side of the street as the car moved smoothly and unhurriedly. Soon the fringes of the city came into view; mercury vapor lights illumined a seedy but safer district, sidewalks without rubble, and buildings that, although decrepit, still functioned. At a slow-changing traffic signal, the Cadillac waited for a green light, then turned left onto a business street and proceeded slowly, like a shark in calm water, searching.

The man driving the Cadillac looked closely at The Java Joint as he rolled by its flickering OPEN ALL NIGHT neon sign without slowing down. After he passed the well-lit but uncrowded coffeehouse, he checked the street in his rearview mirror—traffic was light at this hour—then continued several blocks before pulling to the curb and checking his rearview again. Only a few cars moved in either direction during the two minutes he watched, seeing nothing to arouse his suspicions. He looked at his watch again and eased away from the curb. Within two blocks he spot-

ted a closed service station and used it to make a U-turn and head back to The Java Joint.

The driver was swarthy, with shiny black hair combed straight back and dark eyes that moved quickly, like those of a feral animal, a creature who relies on his senses for survival. The clothes he wore fit him comfortably: well-worn chinos, a faded chambray shirt open at the neck, and a brown deerskin sport jacket that looked right at home on his six-foot frame. He was lean and agile, not yet forty-five but looking fifty, with weathered hands and face. He had a predatory look about him, as if always on the prowl and ready to spring at any moment. His name was Oscar Grabowski, but he was called the scavenger and Black Oscar by those who knew him and also knew that he was not black in any racial way. Years ago he had been clinically diagnosed as schizophrenic but had escaped being hospitalized. On the psychiatric report, one prescient doctor had written, "Patient is clearly sociopathic and without treatment will most likely become dangerous." Oscar snubbed the report, saying, "I'm as normal as the next guy." For him, the next guy might have been Richard Speck.

During the day he acted normal enough; he was often easygoing, even jestful at times, though easily provoked. Darkness seemed to affect him in ways no one understood, to make him broody and bring out his own blackness, so to speak. The dif-

ference was sometimes subtle, but always noticeable. At night he was never casual about anything.

He parked in a loading zone at an angle across the street from the coffee shop, turned off his headlights and the engine. He took the ring of keys from the ignition and put them in his pocket, checked under a copy of *USA Today* on the seat beside him for a plump six-by-nine envelope and a .32 Colt semiautomatic that had been threaded to accept a Maxim silencer, which was affixed. A pocket gun, it had a concealed hammer, grip and slide safeties, both of which he released, and a commercial blued finish. He laid it carefully in the middle of the seat next to the manila envelope and covered both with the newspaper.

Opening the door, he looked at his watch again, then stepped out and pushed the door-lock button. It clicked; he shut the door and walked across the street to The Java Joint.

Inside, he picked a booth in a corner where he could see the street and waited patiently for the waitress, a curvy Levantine type with umber hair who was listening to a middle-aged Romeo at the counter, a balding geep who looked as if he wanted to lick her all over right there. Two older men in lightweight zippered jackets drooped on their stools farther down, snow-topped losers who looked as if they had been abandoned by the world. A couple of thirtyish women, stylishly

dressed and with short hair, were quietly arguing in the booth at the opposite end from him, and in one of the booths across the room two couples enjoyed themselves, their eyes bright with pharmaceutical excitement, their bodies jittery and uninterested in the food before them.

The waitress tore herself away from Casanova and brought a pot of coffee to the man's booth. He turned one of the upside-down cups on the table over in its saucer and pushed it in her direction. She poured the cup almost full, put the pot down, and taking out her pad and pencil, asked "What'll you have?" pleasantly enough but still indifferently, a slight smile on her lips, a glint in her eyes like mischief.

"I've seen his kind before," the man said to her, his eyes on the hair-challenged horndog.

She snorted and shook her head. "So have I—too many to count. But he's slicker than most, entertaining."

"Don't be fooled."

She grinned at him, as gap-toothed as the Wife of Bath. "No way. But he's amusing."

The man nodded and said, "I'll just have coffee now," and when she started to turn, "I'm expecting someone."

"Fine. I'll get back to my entertainment." She beamed at him and returned to the counter.

Two minutes later, a green Ford van stopped in front of the diner and a young blond man in a Chicago Cubs jacket and worn jeans stepped out, one hand mov-

ing over his short hair as if to flatten it, his sleeve pulled back enough to reveal a black leather wrist strap with dull silver studs. He entered the coffee shop, looked around, then joined the man in the corner booth. "You're Oz, right?"

The man nodded. "And I know who you are. They call you the Swede, don't they?"

"Yeah, on accounta my coloring, but what I am is German, really. Well, mostly. I guess."

The waitress came over and the Swede turned his cup upright for her. She poured coffee for him, set the pot down, then took out her pad and pencil.

"I want some pie," the Swede said, grinning at her. "Got any as sweet as you?"

She gave him a street look that counted every dollar in his pocket and weighed his prospects to boot. "Nope, not near." She glanced at Oscar, who closed his eyes and sighed heavily, like a man facing an unavoidable and unwelcome task.

"Just order," he said softly.

"Well, I'll have some cherry. Can't go wrong with cherry, I always say."

The waitress made some marks on her pad, then looked at Oscar again. "I'll bet you're apple," she said.

"You're right."

She returned to the counter to fill their orders, the Swede watching her. "How'd she know apple for you?" he asked, frowning. "You been here before?"

"No."

"Then how'd she hit on apple?"

The scavenger lifted his shoulders an inch and let them drop. "I'm an easy man to read?"

"You, yeah, you're about as easy to read as a Greek newspaper. I know about you."

"And she knows about you. Don't be an asshole."

Some color visited the Swede's cheeks. His lips parted, then clamped together as he stared at the man across from him.

"Look," the scavenger said calmly. "We're here to do business, nothing else. Nothing."

"No harm in a little fun," the Swede muttered.

"Business: How careful were you?"

"Whatta you mean?"

"I mean, what precautions did you take? Were you, uh, watchful, alert, or were you just scoping chicks and playing with yourself driving down here?"

"This time a night, no quiff to look at. And nobody followed me, if that's what you mean."

"You say that for sure, huh? These days cops jam those little transmitters no bigger 'n a poker chip under your fender or somewhere so they can track you from a mile away, don't have to be behind you or nowhere in sight. Heat could be waiting out there right now, all I know."

"No chance. I put that van on a rack and looked everywhere myself right before I loaded your stuff three hundred miles back. I swept it—that baby's *clean*."

The man nodded toward the street, his eyes on the green Ford.

"And you think that's a cool idea, cops never notice vans?"

"No need for sarcasm. The back's filled with cleaning supplies, legit stuff, nothing the least bit suspicious even if I got stopped. Which I didn't. I drove like a schoolteacher on a field trip, Mr. Good Cit all the way."

Oscar held up his hand as the waitress approached. She placed the slices of pie before them, laid forks on paper napkins, and smiled as if she were enjoying a private joke. "Hope that's sweet enough for you," she said to the Swede.

"Yeah," he said, not looking at her.

She flashed her teeth at Oscar and went back to the counter.

Picking up his fork, the Swede said, "She was being sarcastic, wasn't she? I can tell when people are sarcastic."

"You get that a lot?"

The Swede stared at Oscar as if confused. "No matter," he said, shaking his head. He cut a triangle of pie from the tip of the wedge and put it in his mouth. While chewing he said, "As for business, I'm here solo, nobody caught a ride. You may not know it, but I'm good. And I'm reliable."

"Is that so? I hear you got a case coming up, Fed'ral."

The Swede swallowed loudly before speaking. "That's a hummer, a real hummer, wasn't anything I did."

"How many charges?"

"Two. That my lawyer says he can beat. They weren't even after me, they wanted somebody else, a

guy working for that Italian, Calabrese, I think. But they got me and thought they could squeeze me to give up the supplier. I didn't rat."

"Not yet, anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean? I ain't a rat."

"Stand-up guy, huh?"

"You bet."

"No, a bet's a gamble, don't like gambles. You saying you don't know what'll happen if they clamp harder, if you're convicted, maybe, and have to do a chunk?"

"Never happen. My lawyer guarantees I'll get off, *guarantees* it, man."

"Who's your lawyer?"

"Bailey."

"F. Lee?"

The Swede stiffened but said nothing, glaring at the other man, who looked steadily back at him. Slowly he untensed himself and said, "Not F. Lee, the one downtown."

"Stocky guy, not quite tall as you, with a short beard?"

"More like a mustache and a goatee."

"I know him, that's Max Cosso's lawyer. He's tricky, all right, but still, people worry."

"Who? Cosso? He think I might roll over?"

Oscar pulled the corners of his mouth down, then said, "He's concerned, got a lot at stake."

"I know, man, but he's got no cause to think I won't stand up."

"Nothing to worry about."

"That's right."

"Good. Max'll be glad to hear it."



The Swede bobbed his head twice, then returned to his pie. "This ain't bad," he said.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, chewing, swallowing, sipping their coffee like square John citizens having a late-night snack. The Swede finished his pie, drank the last of his coffee, and patted his lips with the napkin before crumpling it. Leaning forward slightly, he said, "Where'll we do the transfer?"

"Few miles from here. I'll follow you at a distance just to be safe." He told the Swede exactly where to go. "When we get near, I'll pull in front of you and go into the alley. You back in so we'll be leaving in different directions."

The Swede nodded.

"I've got your money in the car and will give it to you soon's the goods are in my trunk."

"Not real trusting, are you?"

Oscar smiled but it looked wrong, more like lips stretched by will rather than cause, and about as friendly as the final notice from a finance company. "This isn't a business of trust," he said coldly, his hunter-hunted eyes sending a message.

But the Swede looked away.

The waitress appeared with a fresh pot of coffee and Oscar passed a flat hand over the table to indicate "No more." He took a wad of money from his pocket, peeled off a ten, and gave it to her, saying, "Keep the change."

"Thanks," she said, then looked at the Swede. "I hope your pie was sweet enough."

"Let's just go," the Swede mum-

bled, sliding his way out of the booth.

Oscar stood, touched the woman's arm with his fingers. "Be careful," he whispered. "The world is full of snares."

She grinned at him, then winked. "You have a great night, you hear?"

The two men stopped on the sidewalk beside the van, surveying the street in both directions before going to their respective vehicles. The Swede waited for the other man to turn his car around, then he drove slowly away.

Oscar stayed far behind the van. He could see no signs of a tail, either on him or the Swede. After three uneventful miles, he sped up, passed the van, then slowed again, watching the street carefully. This part of the city contained many deserted buildings and few people, a metropolitan wasteland. He braked, then turned into an alley between two derelict buildings and stopped about forty feet in, leaving the engine running. Early in the evening he had gone through the alley, sweeping broken glass and moving any potential obstacle out of his path, clearing the way for a quick departure. He cut the lights, punched the button activating the trunk release, and stepped outside to watch the Swede back into the alley as instructed.

The van stopped six feet from the Cadillac, the lights went off, and the engine died. Immediately the Swede got out, opened the

back of the van, and began moving cartons around. He separated one box from the others and put it in the open trunk, then shut the lid and put out his hand.

"I'll get your money," the scavenger said. He reached into the car from the driver's side, flicked the newspaper aside, grasped the Colt with his left hand and the envelope with his right, taking it out first. Standing with his left hand inside the car, he tossed the packet to the waiting man and said, "You want to count it?"

"Hell yes, I want to count it," the Swede answered, turning the envelope in his hands, looking for the flap, which was sealed and taped over. "Like you say, this ain't a business of trust."

Oscar said, "How true," and swung his left arm in front of him. He shot the Swede in the lower belly, causing him to drop the unopened packet and bend forward, clutching his abdomen, his eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

"You son of a—"

Oscar shot him three more times in the body, watched him collapse on the floor of the alley, then moved up close for a final shot to the head, all the sounds effectively muffled. He picked up the envelope and returned it to the car, dropping it beside the Colt on the passenger seat before replacing the newspaper. He closed the door and drove quietly away.

"Luck," said newly appointed Lieutenant Ritter, explaining his

rise in the department. "Lucky Lew, they used to call me." He winked and leaned his chair back against the wall. "Now they call me *sir*."

"Takes more than luck," Lelchuk said. At thirty-six he had just been promoted to sergeant, and he knew that luck had nothing to do with his advancement. Unlike Ritter, who was a year younger, he had no sense of style, only perseverance, which took the form of devotion to method and routine, and he was as securely wrapped in his policeman's identity as a nun in her wimple.

"Yeah, but luck's the most important thing in this work. The biggest busts I ever made were due to pure chance. For instance, did you know that I popped the Full Moon Killer by mistake?"

"What about Red Rocks Farrell?"

"Yeah, Robbin' Red." Ritter smiled and pulled a handful of pistachio nuts from his coat pocket. As he talked, he extracted the kernels and dropped the shells into a wastebasket. "Tornado Red they called him, on account of his temper, I guess. Or maybe the way he could run through a bank. Anyway, he'd been holed up for two weeks after relieving the First National of over twenty grand in less than three minutes, and he was itchy. Got pig drunk, had a fight with his girlfriend, slugged her, and passed out. She called the station about two A.M. and fingered him, said she was grabbing a couple of G's and splitting, not to look for her."

"Is that straight?"

Ritter raised his right hand as though taking an oath. "Swear. I just happened to be in the building and took the call, otherwise Fogel would've caught it." He chuckled. "Easiest collar I ever made. I had to wake the guy up to arrest him, already had the cuffs on. The only hassle was counting the money."

Leitchuk rolled a sheet of paper into the old black Underwood on his desk. "That's not the way you reported it," he said, squinting at the keyboard as he positioned his hands on the keys. They were in the bullpen of the Narcotics Office, an open room containing five metal desks, two of which were placed back to back, several filing cabinets, a coat rack, and a scarred wooden table on which rested a couple of manuals and a coffeemaker. Cups hung from a pegboard on the wall next to a bulletin board posted with department memos and a few surveillance photos of both men and women standing in doorways or by automobiles. The desktops were all cluttered except one, which had a computer terminal with a visual display screen on it. A printing machine, mounted on metal legs that were bolted to the floor, was next to it.

"I promised the broad I'd leave her out of it, which she liked, not knowing the deal was better for me." Ritter held up his hands and shrugged. "Besides, both the department and the media love elaboration, not simplicity. What was I to do?"

"Embellish to your benefit, I guess."

"Let's just say I *enhance* for cosmetic and dramatic purposes. Having luck's one thing, but using it, making the most of it's another." He took the last pistachio from his pocket and smoothed the flap of his coat. The bottom of the wastebasket was covered with blond hulls that looked like tiny seashells.

The sergeant opened his mouth just as Detectives Mather and Patino slouched in, looking tired and sleepy. They were both on the easy side of thirty, an inch or two under six feet, bearded and shaggy, wearing scruffy jeans, beads and bracelets, and tatty denim vests over faded shirts. Ritter, who thought they looked like cops trying to pass for street people, acknowledged them with a head flick. "Well, if it isn't Toma and Serpico, the nemeses of the underworld." He swung his head from shoulder to shoulder as he looked them over. "How are things in Crime City?"

"Polluted," Mather said.

"And you grow hair all over and maybe catch terminal scabies to score that flash? I can look out the window and see as much."

"Can you see where it's coming from?" Patino asked. "'Cause if you can, I could change clothes, sit up here all day, and gawk out the window."

"Not me," Mather said. "I don't like consorting with undesirables enough for that."

"Maybe you're right," Patino said, wiggling his nose. "The per-

spective's too different from up here."

Mather shuffled over and looked out the third-floor window.

"Distorted," he said. He crossed his arms and leaned against the frame, pretending to study the view. In the next block, huge power shovels that looked like mechanical beasts bit up the earth with yellow iron jaws and spat it into yellow trucks that took it away. The entire block was fenced off, but debris lay uncollected on the sidewalks below signs that proclaimed: DOWNTOWN IMPROVEMENT—ANOTHER BENJAMIN PROPERTIES PROJECT. "Hell, from here things look pretty good."

"From here," Patino said, "I can't tell a load of snow's hitting town, can you?"

Lelchuk raised his head like a forest animal sensing smoke in the air. "What?"

"That's the noise on the street," Mather said.

"The noise on the street," Ritter mimicked. "You guys are beginning to sound like TV cops."

Patino said, "Role models." He glanced at Mather. "We have to get our images somewhere."

Ritter ate the last pistachio, stretched his arms, and yawned. "How big's this snowstorm?"

"Don't know exactly," Mather said. "The amount's vague, but the word *plenty* is being spread around."

"Isn't that usually the case?" Ritter asked. "Dealers put the word out that everybody's going to get well, Christmas is coming,

but then Santa Claus turns up short and the price goes up."

Mather hunched his shoulders and turned from the window. "Well, they are businessmen and it's a seller's market, but I think this bone is solid steer."

"When'll you know for sure?"

"We've got a tentative buy set up for tomorrow night, but our man's just a mover."

Ritter examined his fingernails. "Who's your connection?"

Mather said, "A guy named Jilly Skuggs—you know him?"

Ritter nodded and withdrew a pair of nail clippers from his pocket. It was on a ring with his office keys. "Yeah, I know Jilly. He's handling hard stuff now?"

"No slam, but he's really into coke dealing," Mather said. "It's made him a lot of money." He sat down and hoisted his feet onto the gray metal desk across from Lelchuk. His suede desert boots were scuffed and run down at the heels, and the left one had a gash across the toe. "All in all, he's pretty discreet about it, too. Operating out of a bar the way he does, he's pretty careful."

"But not careful enough," Ritter said, studiously trimming a hang-nail.

"We've worked hard on this," Patino said, "and getting to him wasn't a bit easy."

"And he's as far up as you've reached?"

Mather and Patino looked at each other, then back at Ritter. Mather said, "We didn't get to Max Cosso, if that's what you mean."

"Are you sure Cosso's on top of Jilly?"

"Absolutely," Patino said. "We just can't get to him."

"No wonder," Ritter deadpanned. "You're not dressed right."

**H**eading away from the city, the truck barged down the street rumbling strepently, like some animal filled with urban terror. A colored emblem on the doors above the words SANITATION DEPARTMENT identified the vehicle as city property. Two men were inside, one black and one white, both wearing blue coveralls.

"Junk," the driver said. The word, with its piercing, harsh consonants—the coarse affricate J, nasal N, and plosive K—seemed to be implanted in the high cab of the truck. But it was more than a word, a churlish sound. It was a theme lodged in the driver, Emmett Bushnell, like a bone in the throat, and he mulled it over, scowling. "Junk." It was almost a presence, one that constantly rangled, one that could not be routed.

"I swear, Darcy, we're nothing but slaves, all of us," Emmett said to his companion, who had spent the day lugging and hoisting hearty cans until he was too tired to care about anything. At this hour Darcy usually sat slumped in the seat with his head propped against the window and cushioned with his rolled-up jacket, sometimes nodding, never more than half awake, occasionally

punctuating Emmett's monologue with grunts of sour agreement. It was the end of the day, and except for the final dump and the drive back to the operations center, the work was over. It was also Emmett's reflective part of the day, the time when he unfettered his thoughts with captive Darcy, and he talked continuously, steering the truck with a professional ease that was almost casual, as though driving were only something he did while talking, instead of the other way around. "To junk," he said, and shook his head slowly, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and turned the truck off the paved street. That wasn't what he had meant to say, or at least it hadn't sounded like the idea he was thinking about and trying to find words for. "It seems like everything turns to junk, we can't move it fast enough."

"Uh-huh."

Emmett frowned and, like a man on the verge of a thoughtful discovery, twisted his weathered face in contemplation as he talked. His hair was thinning and turning gray, but his eyebrows were dark and bushy above a Roman nose that twitched every time he blinked.

"Darcy, I swear this country is a machine that sucks in money and spits out junk."

"Yuh."

"It's sharp guys running the machine and catching the money, while clods like us thrash about to grab what they spill or throw away. I tell you, sometimes I get so

mad—" He saw it then, lying in the middle of the road, its glossy sheen covered by a film of dust but still glistening redly, like a shiny toy. They were on the flat dirt road to the dump, and Emmett stopped the truck and got out, a cloud of dust slowly rising into the still air around him. Darcy opened his eyes and began to stir but settled back when he saw they had not yet arrived at the dump.

"Hey, look at this," Emmett said, holding the shoe aloft. "Isn't that a beauty?"

Darcy turned his head slightly and gave a cursory look with one sad eye. "Uh-huh."

"Oh, that's a beauty," Emmett insisted. It was a high-heeled pump in glossy patent leather with a delicate little bow on the vamp. He took out his handkerchief and wiped it carefully. "It's not been worn at all hardly," he said as he examined the shoe. "It's almost brand new." He shook his head slowly and got back in the truck, placing the shoe on the seat next to him. "I swear it's a crime what people throw away. Waste, waste, waste."

Darcy frowned. "Now what you want with one frigging shoe?"

"Maybe I can locate the other one."

"You crazy."

"Well, I'd like to find the mate to it."

Darcy smiled lazily, showing his gold-framed front teeth. "Maybe the scavenger found it."

"I sure hope not," Emmett said. "Not that greedy son of a bitch."

He released the brake and ground the gears roughly as he pulled away, causing Darcy to open an eye briefly. "I ain't forgot that wood chair he beat me to," Emmett grumbled, his knuckles pale over the steering wheel. "I saw it first, saw the guy unloading it with a buncha other stuff, and I kept my eye on it till the guy drove away, but that bastard got to it first. Then had the nerve to try to sell it to me. Claimed it was a genuine Windsor. No, I ain't forgot that."

Darcy mumbled that the scavenger was slick all right.

"But that's a nice-looking shoe," Emmett stated, and he relaxed his grip on the wheel. "My daughter's gonna be graduating from junior high in a coupla months and she's already started talking about what she's gotta have to wear to the shindig they're throwing." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Darcy, when I went to school there wasn't no junior high, there was just grammar school and high school. And there wasn't parties all the time neither. Kids today just think about spending money, having parties, and getting stoned."

"Uh-huh."

"Kids today," he said, shaking his head and losing the thought about the current generation. "I was raised up not to waste." Emmett geared down as he approached the dump. He watched for a moment the huge tractor, a Caterpillar, pushing a wall of dirt over the tons of refuse deposited by overloaded citizens and men

like Emmett in uniformly gray trucks. "Today people throw away more than I ever had."

"They got to keep that machine runnin'," Darcy muttered.

Waving his arms and pointing with exaggeration, a thin man wearing dark glasses and a dirty baseball cap motioned to the spot where he wanted the truck to unload, and Emmett nodded, turned around, and began backing up. "I sure hope somebody found the mate to this shoe," he said.

Darcy grunted and shook himself to a begrudging alertness.

Emmett saw the scavenger then, Black Oscar as he was called, wiry and dark with sun and grime, with high cheek bones and narrow darting eyes that seemed to cast suspicion wherever they looked. His straight black hair gleamed with oil; thick shaggy strands raked across the ragged collar of his jacket as he jerked his head in search of usable articles among the trash, fossicking in waste like a pig after truffles.

As soon as he unloaded, Emmett moved the truck out of the way and parked it beside several other empty tankers. He took the shoe and walked over to the cluster of men, drivers and swappers, who were standing at the edge of the dump, smoking cigarettes and exchanging chaff.

"Whatcha got there?" one of the drivers asked him.

"It's a perfectly good shoe." He held it out for everyone to see. "Practically brand new," he said, turning the shoe so that the viewers could verify his appraisal.

"Just right for my girl. I found it on the road in, and I thought maybe one of you guys might've seen the mate to it."

"Yeah, one shoe is no good," said Black Oscar as he strode toward the group, "unless you got a one-legged girl."

The men chuckled uneasily and began to move about from one restless foot to another.

"How many legs your girl got, Bushnell?" Black Oscar asked.

"Two," he answered flatly and held up the shoe again, ignoring the scavenger. "Any of you guys seen the other one?"

"The *other* one?" Black Oscar bellowed. "You mean she lost her third leg?" He roared in laughter. Some of the men cleared their throats, some giggled nervously.

"I was talking about the shoe," Emmett said coldly. He thought he sounded dumb and that everyone would think he was foolish.

Black Oscar leered at him and Emmett wheeled and started away. "Hey!" the scavenger called. "I thought you wanted that other shoe."

Emmett stopped. He took a deep breath and turned around. "You got it?"

"Has a dog got fleas?" Black Oscar hooked his dark thumbs in his belt and watched Emmett closely through slatted eyes. "What'll you give for it?"

"Like you said, one shoe ain't no use to nobody."

"That's right, but it's not one shoe we're talking about anymore, it's two."

"But it ain't no good to you,"



Emmett reasoned. He tried to laugh and couldn't. "Hell, what're you gonna do with one shoe?"

The scavenger smiled.

Emmett thought for a moment. "You really got it, or you just trying to start something?"

Black Oscar raised his hands from his belt and opened them outward as if opening his very soul for inspection. "Would I do a thing like that?" he asked, an expression of mock outrage on his face. Then he laughed. "'Course I got it. Go look on the front seat."

Emmett walked over to Black Oscar's pickup, the bed of which was loaded with the afternoon's harvest, and looked in the open cabin window. The red pump lay on top of a pile of acquisitions—a wire gauge, several paperback books, a rain hat of translucent plastic, an old radio with two missing knobs, a whisk broom, a steam iron with a frayed cord, all resting on a faded Indian blanket folded neatly into a square. On the floorboard were a pair of roller skates, a tackle box, a feruled fishing rod, a pair of rubber galoshes, a stringless ukulele, a birdcage, and a piece of weathered board with two good strap hinges attached.

"I ain't got nothing to trade you for it," Emmett said, turning away but motioning toward the truck with a jerk of his arm. "It looks to me like you're doing all right for yourself though."

"I get by."

"Why don't you just let me have the shoe? It ain't no good to you."

Black Oscar showed his tar-

stained teeth. "But it is to you. So let's deal."

"I told you, I ain't got nothing to trade."

"I didn't ask for a trade. I asked how much is it worth to you?"

Emmett gulped and hunched his shoulders. He looked around at the men as though seeking confirmation that the scavenger's question was absurd. No one said anything, and some of the men looked away as if their minds were on something else.

"I'll get it," Black Oscar said. He jerked the door of the truck open, grabbed the shoe, and tossed it into the air playfully. "It's a beauty, don't you think? Real mungo."

"It'll do."

"A pair of beautiful shoes like this must cost a lot. I bet a lot, don't you?"

Emmett shrugged. "I don't know."

"Oh sure," Black Oscar went on, "a whole lot. I bet—" He screwed up his face as though whatever figuring he was doing was painful. "I bet at least thirty-five, forty bucks, maybe more."

Emmett pulled the corners of his mouth down and shook his head.

"Probably more," Black Oscar vowed. "And you know it."

"I swear, one shoe ain't no good to nobody," Emmett said, as if he thought the truth of that statement would blot out any further argument.

"That's right!" the scavenger beamed. "Now, you ready to do some good old American dealing?"

Emmett's nostrils flared and he looked down at the shoe. "It probably ain't yours to sell."

"I got it," Black Oscar said, still smiling, "nobody else."

"Way I see it," Emmett said slowly, "it belongs to me more than it does to you."

The scavenger laughed.

"You got it off city property and I work for the city—you don't."

"I work for me," Black Oscar stated. "I'm what they call a . . . a *entrepreneur*. I got a understanding with the city. And I got this shoe. If you want it, you're gonna have to reach a understanding with me. City's got nothing to do with it."

Emmett scratched his head, then began kneading the back of his neck. "All right," he said finally, "how much you want for it?"

"That's better." Like a salesman displaying his prize item, Black Oscar held the shoe gingerly with his fingertips and inspected it from every angle. "It's a new shoe—" He sniffed the hollow and smiled. "—hardly been worn. But since I'm not selling the pair, I can't ask a regular full-price, can I?"

Emmett was silent.

"Half-price would be a bargain and nobody'd dispute that, but I'll let you have it for just five bucks."

Emmett's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth but said nothing.

"Just five dollars and you've got yourself a beautiful pair of shoes."

"I ain't gonna give you no five dollars," Emmett said through clenched teeth.

"You the one wants the shoes," Black Oscar reminded him. "And you can't expect to get 'em free."

"Like you got everything in your pickup."

"I fully expect," the scavenger snapped, "to get something besides dirt out of scrounging through everybody's garbage." He looked around at the men. "Just trying to make a living."

Emmett cleared his throat and said, "A good living, too, I hear. Darcy told me he saw you one Sunday driving around in a new Cadillac."

"You want this shoe," Black Oscar asked sharply, "or not? If you don't want to pay for it, it goes back in my truck, so say so right now."

"It ain't right to charge five dollars for one shoe that ain't no good by itself. I swear it ain't."

"Half of a twenty dollar bill is no good by itself either, but if I had the matching half, I bet you'd be willing to fork over five bucks for it, wouldn't you?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Sure you would. Now stop talking dumb and make up your mind: You want this shoe or not?"

"I'm a fair man and I'll give you—just so's you can make some money—I'll give you a dollar for it."

"A dollar!" Black Oscar yelled. "I'd set fire to it before I'd sell it for a measly dollar."

"There ain't no market for single shoes."

"You an expert on the shoe market?" The scavenger curled his upper lip at Emmett. "You don't

know nothing. You don't know a bargain and you don't know when you're missing a final chance." He held the shoe in front of him. "You want this or not?"

Emmett was speechless. The other men were silent.

"I guess you don't want it," Black Oscar sneered. He began walking away. "I can always set fire to it."

"Wait a minute," Emmett heard himself saying. He felt sweat in his palms and the bite of his fingernails as he clenched his fists.

Black Oscar stopped and turned sideways, looking over his shoulder at Emmett. "What for? I don't see no scratch." He raised his empty hand and rubbed his thumb briskly against his fingertips.

"Wait a minute," Emmett heard himself say again, only his voice sounded strange and alien. He felt himself moving toward Black Oscar and he saw the little smile on the scavenger's face disappear as he approached. "You ain't gonna set fire to it," he heard his alien voice say—and then he saw a hand, his own, reach out for the shoe.

And he heard Black Oscar say "Oh, no you don't!" and the hand that groped for the shoe—his hand—locked onto the scavenger's arm, and another hand, again his own, struck at the grimy head while absently clutching a red pump.

"You maniac!" Oscar screamed, tearing free. He hit Emmett in the face.

Emmett didn't feel anything, but he saw a dazzling flash of

bright colors, followed by a sudden realization that he was sitting on the ground, panting like a dog. The shoe was still in his hand and he whimpered when he saw the bow had been ripped off.

"You ain't gonna burn it," Emmett rasped and spattered himself with flecks of blood. He wiped his mouth with the back of his empty hand, then spat and wiped his mouth again.

Black Oscar was ranting that high-heeled pumps weren't even in style, and anyway, he would do whatever he wanted with the shoe.

"You ain't gonna," Emmett heard the strange voice say and felt himself rising.

The scavenger grabbed the door of the pickup. "That's enough," he said.

But the hands reached out and the next thing Emmett felt was the edge of the pickup's open body smacking his ribs as the scavenger slammed him against the truck. "I said *that's enough*," he heard Black Oscar's voice warning. "Damn nutcase."

On top of the mass in the bed of the truck was an arm's length of lead cinch irrigation pipe and Emmett's hand reached out for it, dropping the shoe in among the scavenger's collection where it caught on the leg of an easel. Emmett saw the pipe swinging in front of him, saw Black Oscar's arm dart up, saw the pipe strike the arm, saw the scavenger's mouth spring open, saw the pipe smash into the screaming face, saw the man drop to his knees

and totter, blood gushing from his face, saw the pipe rise and disappear into the air, then fly down with incredible speed and crunch into the black-maned skull. He felt a stunning shock go through his arms and he heard a commotion behind him. Someone yelled. He backed up and sat down in the dirt. He was at once surrounded by a flurry of legs. He saw a pair of hands twitching on the ground, the spasms stirring up dust around the feet of the men. "He ain't gonna burn it," he heard his weak voice say. He rubbed the palms of his hands into the dirt, but he couldn't feel the ground. "I'm tired," he said.

He heard someone say, "Just sit there, then."

"Oh, sweet Jesus," he heard a high quavering voice like a wail, "you did it, Emmett."

He closed his eyes and tried to figure out what he had done. It had something to do with junk, with losing, with the very center of his life, and he knew it was important, but he could not think clearly.

He opened his eyes and looked up and around at the men until he saw Darcy's dark drawn face. "A slave to junk," he said, trying to remember. "What can I do?"

"Nothin' to do now," Darcy replied softly. "Nothin' at all."

**R**itter closed the door to his office as a beaming Lelchuk rushed into the bullpen, saying, "I just saw Fast Walking Jackson downstairs."

"Did he stop by to tell us a bedtime story?" Ritter asked, putting on his coat.

"No chat. He's being booked on B and E and attempted burglary."

Ritter frowned. "That doesn't sound right."

"Sounds good to me. Anything we can nail him on sounds fine, and the guys who brought him in, couple of patrolmen, say he's nailed tight."

Ritter went downstairs where the uniformed officers were booking Walter Clemon Jackson, alias Jack Clemons, aka "Fast Walking" and "Strut" Jackson: male Caucasian, six feet four, a hundred and ninety pounds, light brown hair, gray-blue eyes, oblique scar on forehead above right eye three centimeters long, no tattoos. One of the officers had just finished fingerprinting him. "Hello, Fast," Ritter said. "How you doing?"

The man wiped his fingers with a paper towel and snorted. He wore a tan whipcord suit and a silk polo shirt the color of garden peas. His legs were long even for a man of his height, which made him look gangly.

"Has he been to our portrait studio yet?"

"Next on the agenda, Lieutenant."

"Well, soon's you finish, bring him into the conversation parlor, okay?" Ritter turned to the other arresting officer, glanced at his nameplate, and led him into a small windowless room furnished with a table and four straight wooden chairs. Ritter sat down

and rested his arms on the table.  
"What's the story, Davis?"

"Nothing unusual. We got a call on a burglary in process, found him inside the store."

"Who reported it?"

Davis looked at his notebook.  
"Man by the name of Halsted, has a business across the street."

"What kind of store was it?"

"Junk."

"You mean a head shop?"

"No, I mean real junk. You know, the sort of place sells all kinds of secondhand stuff—clothes, toasters, chairs, lamps, books—all of it used. A junk store."

"You talk to the owner?"

"No sir, we haven't been able to locate him."

The other officer, Ulrich, brought Jackson into the interview room.

"I'm sorry to hear you've fallen on hard times, Fast," Ritter said. "Things must be grim if you have to steal knickknacks."

Jackson smiled and sat across the desk from him. "It's a mistake."

"Getting caught always is," Davis added.

Ritter looked at the officer and frowned, then turned back to the prisoner, who had closed his eyes and was slowly moving his head from side to side. "But for you this is an unusual mistake—or is breaking and entering your line of work these days?"

"That's the mistake part," Jackson said. "But my attorney will explain it to you in legal jargon.

By the way, don't mind if I call him, do you?"

"Not at all. We'd like to clear up this *mistake* ourselves." Ritter stood and waved his hand to indicate that Jackson could leave.

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

"You could probably help, Fast, if you're not in too much of a hurry."

"No hurry," Jackson grinned. He had one long wrinkle in each cheek so deep set that it looked like a plect. "It's just that my attorney's so much more skillful in the art of communication, I think I'll let him handle it."

"Fine," Ritter said. "Well, see you around. Don't be a stranger."

Ulrich took Jackson out of the room as Ritter rubbed his jaw and stared at the table.

Davis looked at his watch and cleared his throat. "Uh, you want me any more, Lieutenant?"

"Yeah, I want names and addresses. And I want you to keep Jackson in custody as long as you can, at least another hour. Stall, but be subtle. The lawyer'll be waving a writ of mandamus or habeas corpus or turn loosus, so try not to let him get suspicious. Be cool. Can you be cool?"

Davis nodded. "What's going on?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Ritter said.

Emmett Bushnell stared at the floor of the cell and muttered to himself as he tried to recollect the last few hours. Something bad had happened at the dump; the police had transported him from there to the city jail, where

they took his fingerprints, gave him a number, snapped pictures of him, and let him call his wife, who wailed and wept. Then two men from Homicide talked to him for a long time about Oscar Grabo or Grabosi, Grabowski, something like that, who had been murdered. They didn't seem upset about it, and they spoke very softly, but they kept asking questions as though they thought he could help them. But he had never heard of any Grabo. The name Oscar sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. Maybe they were talking about the movies. Garbo? No, it had something to do with junk. Junk, he thought, junk, junk, junk, junk, junk.

For a long time he rocked mechanically on the hard slab that was attached to the wall. Gradually, he slowed his rocking, and finally he stopped moving at all and just sat there, staring through the muddy gloom into pure vacancy.

**“M**r. Halsted? This is Lieutenant Ritter. I'm calling about the attempted burglary you reported. . . . Well, it's not real burglary if nothing is taken. . . . I'd like to stop by and talk to you about this. I realize it's nearly midnight and I won't take long. . . . Good, see you in a few minutes.”

Ritter cradled the telephone and swung his chair around. “Lelchuk, let's go for a ride. I want to look at something.”

The sergeant put on his coat. “I was thinking about going home.”

“Me too. But I want to look at the place Jackson broke into.”

“Why?”

“Because Fast is Max Cosso's henchman, mule, legman. Which means he was probably on an errand for Max.”

“Why would Max want Jackson to break into a store on Grotty Row?”

“That's what I want to know. And that's why we're going to visit Oscar's Odds and Ends.”

The street was old and most of the stores—pawnshops, bars, a couple of greasy spoons, liquor stores specializing in half-pints and short dogs, tattoo parlors, rub joints, pool rooms, and porno houses—were run down and sleazy, relying on blinking lights and gaudy gin-mill neon for attention. When they passed the last drug store, Lelchuk and Ritter felt the street's character quieten but grow more dismal: the dirty garages, soot-streaked warehouses, and gas stations were all closed, and only an occasional wino could be seen staggering along the broken sidewalks or passed out in a doorway. Buildings that had been designed as factories were now used for storage or boarded up, and they stood like condemned prisoners, blindfolded and waiting for death.

“This is what's known as metropolitan dry rot,” Lelchuk said.

“Been this way long's I can remember.” He turned the car into

a cross street and proceeded slowly. "Here are the junk stores."

"Look at the names," Ritter said. "Trader Vic's, House of Bric-A-Brac, Snooper's Paradise, Bargaintown—and for the classy, *The Emporium*. And there's the one we want: Halsted's Haven."

Lelchuk parked in front and shut off the lights and the engine. "No one's there."

"He said he'd be here." Ritter glanced around, then opened the door. "Let's give it a look."

They got out and stood on the sidewalk, taking in the deserted street. "Why would Jackson break into that crap store?" Lelchuk said, pointing across the street to Oscar's Odds and Ends.

"Who can understand the criminal mind?" As Ritter started to knock on the door to the Haven, a hoarse yell told him it was open. Lelchuk jumped, but Ritter smiled and said, "He told me he'd be here."

They went into the dark store and a large blob seated on their left presumed they were the police and said he was Halsted. Lelchuk took out his identification and waved it in the gloom, and Ritter said, "I talked to you on the phone."

"Oh, the lieutenant. There're light switches to your left, but just flip the one in the middle, okay?"

Lelchuk flicked the center switch and a small fluorescent lamp over the door behind him flickered and caught. The illumination was meager, but they could see Halsted plopped in an overstuffed chair in front of the

window, holding a can of diet cola and blinking at them. "I was just sitting here," he said, "looking out the window." He was a huge man with a face as round and plain as a paper plate, and except for a wispy fringe of white hair that trailed from temple to temple like a frazzled wreath, he was bald. A maroon short-sleeved sport shirt with double pockets that bulged covered his belly and draped in his lap like an apron. He wheezed and moved slowly, complaining of emphysema, gout, edema, and something called intermittent claudication. "Wasn't anybody around, everything was quiet, and I was just sitting here. Saw the guy break right in."

Ritter grabbed a folding chair and sat down. "I guess we know why he didn't see you."

Halsted looked from Ritter to Lelchuk, out the window, then to a dented coffee table next to him that was strewn with colorful travel folders on Florida and Arizona. "You probably think that's strange, but I like sitting in the dark looking out my window. Specially when it's quiet. Business is gone, and I only open up in the afternoons anymore, and sometimes it's not worth opening at all." He sighed deeply, making a sound like a death rattle. "The scavenger, on the other hand—Oz, I mean—usually stays open till nine or ten."

"Why didn't he tonight?"

Halsted moved his head from side to side. "I don't know. I figure something's the matter. See, he



grubs out at the dump every afternoon, but he's always back by six. That's when his helper gets off, and Moneybags likes to keep the store open, wouldn't want to miss a chance at copping a buck. Pardon the expression."

"Know the name of his helper?"

"Frank something," Halsted rasped and tried to clear his throat a few times, then shook his head in phthisic resignation. "I don't know his last name, but I do know he's kin to Oz. A cousin, I think, so he might have the same name."

"Anyone been around since the arrest?"

"Two guys in a tow truck for the burglar's car."

"Anyone else?"

"Some kids riding around, one car doing about sixty, and a young couple dancing along the sidewalk chased by a bearded geezer in a wheelchair. Got no idea what the story was there, but when it comes to weirdness, maybe it's better not to know."

"What I meant was—"

"Oh, nobody trying to case the joint, that's what you're after. Only reason I'm still here is because I got all keyed up and I'm just trying to sit it out, get calm. Tell you the truth, I got curious when I saw Frank lock up and leave a little after six."

"Why's that?"

"The scavenger's been operating there for seven or eight years, and like I said, he's always back at the store by six."

"So you think something happened to him?"

"Something's happened, I don't know what."

Ritter turned to Lelchuk. "Check the morgue."

Halsted gurgled and jerked his head up quickly, his fat jowls quivering. "You think he's dead?" Lelchuk went out to the car.

"I don't think anything," Ritter said. "I'm just curious, like you."

"Well, I never thought about the morgue."

"I assume when a person of steady habits breaks the pattern that something is likely to be wrong. And when I assume something's happened, I always begin with the very worst possibility and work backward."

"I guess that way things can only get better," Halsted wheezed. "I don't wish him in the morgue, though. It's true he's just about driven me out . . . I've been thinking about quitting. But I don't wish nobody in the morgue. No siree."

"I'm not wishing, Mr. Halsted, just checking." Ritter looked around the store, which was half empty. "Is that why your stock's low?"

"What?"

"You said you were thinking about quitting."

"Yeh. These days I don't buy hardly anything." He chuckled. "And I don't sell hardly anything, either."

"But your competitor does all right, you say."

"Oz? *Terrific* is the word."

"His place doesn't look any better than yours."

"Looks don't mean anything. I'll

bet he's rich, but you'd never know it to look at him. He looks like a bum, but he's really a hustler, a shrewd one too. Always got his eyes open. And he can fix damn near anything. He takes stuff I wouldn't touch and ticks it up so it works good and looks halfway presentable, too. I tell you, he is rough competition for the rest of us."

Ritter nodded and leafed through the brochures on Arizona, where everything appeared to be wonderfully sunny and all the people smiled as they radiated good health. "Going away?"

"Yeh, I'm about ready to quit. Right now, it's mostly habit that keeps me coming down here at all. It sure isn't money, I'll tell you."

A few minutes later, Lelchuk came back in, nodding. "You were right."

Halsted's eyes and mouth opened wide, and in the dim light he was all circles. "Dead?"

"He was killed at the city dump late this afternoon."

"Killed?"

"How?" Ritter asked.

"It seems he got in an argument with a driver of a garbage truck. Apparently, the driver just flipped out and bashed in his skull with a lead pipe."

"Murdered!"

Ritter stood up. "You okay, Mr. Halsted?"

"No—oh no, I never wished for anything like this."

"I'm sure you didn't."

"I swear it. I told you before, I don't wish nobody in the morgue.

Oh, this is terrible!" With trembling hands he fumbled a vial from his shirt pocket and dumped out two capsules, then swallowed them with some of the diet cola. His enormous chest heaved and shuddered as he tried to suck more air into lungs that resisted, his pie-pan face contorted with the effort.

"We're going across the street now, Mr. Halsted," Ritter said, "to look around. Do you need a ride home, or anything?"

"No, my car's in back. Oh me! I never—I never wished anything like this. Never!"

"Just take it easy. We'll check with you before we leave."

"Holy Mary, Mother of God . . ."

As soon as Ritter closed the door behind him, he asked softly, "A freak killing?"

"Seems that way." Lelchuk looked both ways before stepping into the empty street. "The driver evidently went berserk. The argument was over, get this, an item in the trash, a discarded glove or something."

"Weird."

They stood in front of Oscar's store. A police department seal pressed into a right angle against the door and the frame quoted the law prohibiting entry to any persons not having official business. The door was solid oak and had been fitted with a round deadbolt lock about six inches above the original handle, which had been twisted off and was lying on the pavement. "Fast sure was clumsy, wasn't he?" Ritter looked at the keyhole in the added lock, then

took a packet of shims and small slender rods from his pocket. He fitted a thin metal bar into the cylinder and pushed it forward until he felt the first tumbler pin, then inserted the raking bar. Working slowly, applying exact pressure on the tension bar, he raked the lock clockwise. As the tumbler pins were forced open, he pressed the tension bar further into the lock until all the pins had fallen and the lock released. He picked up the handle, worked it back into its socket, broke the police seal, and pushed the door open. "Now, with a little luck we might figure out what the bungling burglar was after."

Lelchuk turned on all the overhead lights. "Jee-sus, look at this!"

The store was rectangular and the walls were covered with shelves stacked to the ceiling with all kinds of merchandise. There were bulging racks and steel shelving in the middle, and in the back, built into the room, was an office about fifteen by twenty. In the center of the store, a U-shaped counter with a cash register on it commanded an open space and a clear view of an aisle straight to the front door.

"Toys, clothes, furniture, electric fans, hacksaws. Look there—walking canes and a hurdy-gurdy." Lelchuk shook his head, awed by the inventory. "Everything from kites to wheelbarrows."

Ritter looked through a box of phonograph records. "You like Stan Getz?"

"I'm not much for jazz." Lelchuk stood still, not touching anything.

"I like music I can understand."

"You like irony?"

"Is that a rock group?"

"No, the first album I saw is called *Cold Blood*. Isn't that something?" Ritter took out a record and looked at it. "Hey, here's an old Bob Prince album."

Lelchuk exhaled loudly. "What are we looking for?"

"I don't know. I see a lot of stuff, but I don't see anything unusual, do you? Let's try the office."

The door was locked. Ritter looked at the keyhole in the knob, then selected an instrument from his pack and worked it into the lock. He frowned, withdrew the shim, and tried another, fingering it until the door opened. "Sesame," he said. "It's magic."

Lelchuk turned on the lights. Unlike the outside store, the office was tidy. There was a small bathroom in the rear on the right, and on the left, next to a large filing cabinet, a bar with a sink and a tiny refrigerator. A counter spanned the side of the building from the bathroom to the front wall of the office. Two large gray blankets were draped on top of the counter and hung to the floor. Resting on the blankets were electric blenders, microwave ovens, transistor radios, and a color television set, plugged in. Across from the counter was a walnut desk with a well-worn judge's chair behind it and two captain's chairs in front. The desktop was shiny and held only a beige push-button telephone, a large chrome stapler, and tiered wire baskets with papers in them.

"Cozy," Ritter said. "See what's underneath the counter."

Lelchuk lifted the blankets and folded them over the blenders and toasters. An IBM Selectric typewriter, two more color TVs, a desktop computer, and a pair of VCRs were exposed. "I'll bet those are hot as a baker's oven," he said.

"Wouldn't surprise me."

"You want me to take down model and make and give a list to Robbery?"

Ritter opened the desk drawers, looked through the papers, and shook his head. "No, let's browse a little more." He opened the filing cabinet and looked at the folders and boxes full of cards, invoices, copies of sales slips, cash register tapes, bank statements, federal tax reports—all legitimate business records. He turned to the bar and examined the bottles, then opened the double doors underneath the refrigerator. There were some rags and sponges, a carton of small polyethylene bags, three bars of soap, a half-gallon bottle of laundry bleach, and a heavy pasteboard box marked "Commercial Cleanser." Ritter started to close the doors, then stopped, pushed the soap and bleach out of the way, and removed the box. The four flaps of the lid were interfolded but not sealed. He undid the flaps and lifted out the Styrofoam liner. "Eureka," he said.

Lelchuk looked over his shoulder at the five plastic bags of white powder. "Is that what I think it is?"

Ritter lifted one of the packages, opened it, pinched a tiny bit of the powder, and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger where it quickly vanished, leaving only a trace of oiliness on his fingertips. "That's good cleanser," he said, smiling.

"Cocaine," Lelchuk said, one hand across his forehead. "It's true, you are lucky."

Ritter took a glass from the bar and filled it with water, then dropped in a little of the crystalline powder. It dissolved immediately. "Real good," he said, then emptied the glass and poured bleach into it. "We don't have a D-ometer, so we'll use—" he read from the side of the plastic container—"sodium hypochlorite, five point twenty-five percent." He put a spot of powder in the glass and for a few seconds nothing happened, then it dissolved in slow milky strands that trailed to the bottom and disappeared, leaving only a small oily halo on the surface. Ritter whistled. "That is first-rate cleanser."

Lelchuk hefted the bags. "A couple of pounds or so each. Probably kilos, wouldn't you say?"

"Uh-huh." Ritter went into the bathroom, emptied the glass, and washed it. When he came back, he replaced the glass on the bar, took a pencil from Oscar's desk, and began scribbling on the back of an envelope. "Five keys, a little over eleven pounds. Icing this good will go for at least a hundred a gram. Figuring low, that's over twenty-eight hundred an ounce, which is forty-five thou-

sand dollars a pound. Stepped on twice, this stuff could still get eighty bucks a gram, and that means—" He stopped abruptly, concentrating on his math. He looked at the figures and raised his eyebrows. "That means a million six on the streets, probably closer to two million."

"What's it doing here?"

"This junkman was obviously the buyer, the middleman. Cosso probably avoids making any direct contact with smugglers."

"What do we do now?"

Ritter replaced the pencil, put the envelope in his pocket, resealed the plastic bag, and returned it to the pasteboard box. Then he put the liner over the cocaine, refolded the lid, and pushed the box back under the sink. He returned the soap, sponges, bleach, and the carton of sandwich bags. He took out his handkerchief and dried the glass he had used and replaced it. "Okay, let's go."

"Go?" Lelchuk's eyes were as big as Halsted's.

"Nothing else to do here." Ritter turned off the lights and ushered Lelchuk through the door, making sure it locked behind them. Checking the back of the store, he saw that the solid rear doors were secured with a two-by-six through iron brackets. "Anybody breaking in there will make real noise."

They turned out the lights and closed the front door. "Get another seal out of the car while I take this one off," Ritter said, pulling the torn pieces from the wood and

putting them in his pocket. He picked up the handle again and used it to close the door.

Lelchuk came back with a new seal, which he peeled away from its backing and stuck to the frame and the door in the same place as the other one. "You think he'll do it again, don't you?"

"Cosso's already got a hundred K invested at the bottom, maybe twice that, for all I know. Which is incentive enough, but the thought of half a million or more makes the risks look smaller."

"I don't know."

"I see at least five hundred thousand good reasons to try again and only one reason not to. Max will go with the odds. Furthermore, he's got no idea we're on to him and no reason to suspect that I can see." He smiled and patted Lelchuk on the shoulder. "Let's get off the street. Put the car in the alley where Halsted keeps his. I'll let you in the back door."

**F**ast Walking Jackson left the police station with a thickset man wearing a tailored suit of rough tussah silk, gleaming alligator shoes, and black-rimmed glasses. His squared-off goatee and mustache were salted with gray, but his hair was black and parted in a perfectly straight line an inch or so to the right of center. The top of his head was on a level with Jackson's earlobes.

"I don't *know*," Jackson said for the third time. "I can't figure it out. Nobody was around."

"That you saw."

"I tell you *nobody* was around. Whatta you think I am, stupid? You think I'm gonna break in with somebody watching?"

"I think that's what you did. Christ, why'd you go in the front anyway?"

"Aw, gimme some credit, man. I tried the alley first, but the back is barricaded, for chrissake, it would take a hockey team and a battering ram to get in that way. I had to go in the front."

"And blow up your spot."

"Look, the street was dead, there's no light on Oscar's door, and I was as quiet as an ant walking on cotton." He swung his head slowly from side to side. "It was just dumb luck."

"You're half right."

"Whatta you mean?"

"I'll put it this way," the attorney smirked. "If you're going to travel the road of crime, you ought to know the difference between a freeway and a blind alley."

"Huh?"

"You saw a green light instead of a stop sign, Fast, and that means you weren't alert."

"I keep telling you—"

"Get in the car and shut up. I've got to think."

"Car," Jackson blurted, as if struck by a new thought. "I gotta get my car outta the impound."

Ritter said, "Mr. Halsted, we have reason to believe that another attempt may be made on the store over there, and we'd like to use your place to stand watch."

"You mean like a stakeout?"

"Just a precaution, you understand." Ritter smiled. "After all, it's our job to protect property."

"What makes you think somebody will try again tonight—or, I should say, this morning?" He gulped, his gouty fingers drumming on the chair arm.

"Call it police instinct. Nothing may come of it, but we feel obligated to make sure. We need your cooperation."

"Sure. It's time I got out of here anyhow. And if anything else happens, I don't want to be around to have it upset me. But I think you're wasting your time, Lieutenant. The law of averages must be against anything else happening to Oscar."

"That's a law we don't enforce."

Groaning mightily, Halsted pushed against the arms of the chair and hoisted himself up. He stood for a few moments, looking around and patting his pockets. "Okay, the place is yours." He tittered weakly. "Not that it matters much, but make sure you lock the doors when you leave."

"We will, and thank you for your assistance." Ritter shook his pudgy hand and plodded with him to the back of the store, the older man halting with each step as if movement were pain itself. "I'll see to it that the department sends you a letter of gratitude."

"A letter, huh? I don't suppose there's any money in it, like a reward or something?"

"No sir, I'm afraid not."

"Too bad."

"You have our appreciation. If we had more alert and concerned

citizens like you, our jobs would be much easier."

Halsted grunted. "I could use the money."

"Everything has gone wrong today," Max Cosso said. He was a short man who wore lifts in his shoes and stood very erect. Except for the attorney, who was five eleven, everyone who worked for him was over six feet tall, including his mistress. He enjoyed bossing a menagerie that towered over him, and he remarked frequently that "power is not vested in size."

The attorney shook his head and caressed his goatee.

Jackson said, "The vibes are bad. I don't like the feel of this at all."

Cosso's face turned red. "What do you mean, *vibes*? Is today the thirteenth? Is it a full moon? Does your horoscope say to stay in bed? Don't give me vibes!"

The attorney sighed. "He just meant the occurrences are—"

"I know what 'the occurrences' are. Who could've figured Oscar to get himself offed by a god-damn shoe freak? Or that Fast would work his show in front of an audience? But no matter what goofy things happen, nothing's going to stop me from getting the candy. So let's think this out carefully."

"What do you mean?" the attorney asked.

"What's likely to happen now?" Max Cosso thundered. He had the deep resonant voice and mobile face of a stage actor, and he

moved about and made sweeping gestures as he talked. "I figure tomorrow the cops will probably be all over Oscar's place like a tent. A guy gets snuffed and his business gets broken into the same day, even a dumb cop might want to check things out. Christ, I can't take a chance on a badge turning up blankets and opening doors. 'Oh, what have we here?' " he mimicked. " 'It looks like ten or twelve pounds of happy dust.' "

"We don't know that the police have related the two events," the attorney said calmly. "My impression is that they have not."

"Your vibes?"

"No. The arresting officers don't even know Oscar's last name. Therefore—"

"Therefore they'll be sure to drop by the first thing tomorrow, wouldn't you think? At which time they'll find out Oscar got himself wasted, and while we know there's no connection, they don't—so what are they likely to think?"

The attorney took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger, then massaged the bridge of his nose. "I can't speculate that they would suspect anything."

"Okay, forget it. Let's say that's not in the tea leaves. But with Oscar cold, what happens to the store—and to my freeze?"

"I'll get appointed as executor and handle everything. Just be patient."

"I've got a lot of money in this," Cosso said through clenched



teeth, "and right now I got nothing that says I won't lose it all and forfeit one hell of a return to boot."

The attorney put his glasses back on and adjusted them carefully.

"All the more reason to proceed with caution."

"And all the more reason to get the golden egg out of the store and into my nest where I can hatch it. I can't take any chances on having the heat find it. And the way I figure it, every hour increases their chances—which means mine get worse."

"Not necessarily," the attorney said. "As a matter of fact, I think the more time that passes the safer we'll be."

"How do you figure?"

"When the police discover that the owner was killed on the same day his store was broken into, they will probably make a joke of it—you know, 'It just wasn't his day'—and rack it up to coincidence. Which is precisely the case. After all, the killing was a bizarre happening and should in no way alert suspicion."

"But what if it does?"

"That's simply not likely. If you can just be patient, I will assume executorship and the goods will be at my disposal."

Cosso glared at the attorney. "I don't like it," he said. "I'm just hanging here, and I want some good news."

"One good thing," Fast said. "At least Oz took care of the Swede before checking out."

"Shut up!" Cosso roared, then

stopped pacing and clapped both hands over his face.

Lelchuk yawned for the third time. "I still think we're just wasting a night."

"You sure are sleepy," Ritter said, drumming his fingers on the arms of Halsted's overstuffed chair. "Want some zip? There's plenty of it close by."

"No, I hate that stuff."

"I got nothing against dope. That is, for the most part. PCP, STP, crap like that I don't like, but in general I think drugs are to our time what booze was to Prohibition."

"What about skag?"

"I think it should be legalized."

"You're kidding."

"Uh-uh. Contrary to public opinion, heroin is not a particularly dangerous drug. It doesn't damage the heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, or the cardiovascular or respiratory systems. It does affect the calcium balance in the body, but then so do things we eat. In ideal circumstances—which we're never likely to see—it might increase life span, seeing that it's the ultimate trunk." He stretched his arms and chuckled. "Hell, it's only hurtful if discontinued."

"You never heard of ODs?"

"A slew of legal drugs and natural plants can kill you, but addicts would rarely OD if the product were subject to some kind of quality control or standardizing."

Lelchuk rocked his head disbelievingly. "You have the strangest attitudes."

"I didn't want the Narc divi-

sion, but my bars were contingent on this hitch. Wasn't room for another lieutenant in Robbery or Homicide, which is where I wanted to go. Bunco didn't need me and Vice is full of volunteers, so I was promoted with the understanding that I'd move to the hop squad."

"You're marking time, huh?"

"That's about it," Ritter nodded. "I've put very little into the job. I'm riding out my reputation, and that can't last much longer. After nine months, I can't show the captain an arrest record that'll make him stop frowning."

"You're getting pressure?"

"The chief wants collars. 'He reads those monthly reports like the Dow Jones averages. Do you have any idea how happy he'll be if we bring in eleven pounds of superfine C and Cosso?'"

"I can see your name in the papers now."

"Yours too. 'Officers net million dollar drug cache in early morning raid.' Like it or not, that kind of publicity is good for you."

"So it's not dope that matters to you?"

"Not in the sense that I have a mission to stop trafficking—which, as you must know, is impossible. But a big bust will make our stock go up in the chief's eyes and he'll forget about the other months. We can say we've been working on this for a long time. When things get quiet again, I'll put in for a transfer."

"Mather and Patino are left out."

Ritter pulled the corners of his

mouth down and shrugged. "Those guys get their rocks playing undercover cop. You know, not only do I disapprove of that kind of police work, I think it should be against the law."

"You have a peculiar code of ethics."

"Yeah, I believe in playing fair."

Lelchuk wandered around the dark store looking for a cot. "What a way to spend a night," he complained.

"*What's New?* That was the name of the album," Ritter said, looking out the window from Halsted's chair. "Bob Prince and his Orchestra: *What's New?* I saw a Buck Clayton record, too."

"Never heard of him."

"What do you listen to?"

"Right now I'm listening to my better judgment, which says 'Get out of here and go home.'"

"The day's been good," Ritter said. "I feel like a gambler on a run; I feel lucky."

"And like the gambler, you don't know when to quit." Lelchuk sat down in the folding chair.

"We'll see." Ritter stretched his arms and grinned. "Been lucky all my life. I couldn't be a cop without luck."

Lelchuk frowned. Since he didn't think of himself as lucky, he suspected that Ritter might be putting him down. "It can't take the place of hard work," he said. "The job's got to be done, and if everybody sat around waiting for Lady Luck to—"

"Oh sure," Ritter said. "Everybody's got to work, and having a

talent, a feel for it, makes the grind easier, too. But without luck, the job's just a—"

He slid out of the chair quickly and crawled along the floor to the edge of the window. Lelchuk reached for his Police Special as he moved behind the door.

"No lights on," Ritter said, watching the silver Park Avenue glide slowly past. "They nearly drove up on us."

The car continued through the next block, then turned around and came back just as slowly, easing to a stop in front of Oscar's store. Max Cosso and Fast Walking Jackson got out and stood at the entrance. The car moved away.

"Look at that Cosso, will you?" Ritter said softly. "He stands so upright, it looks like he's leaning backward. Isn't it odd for a guy to look so straight and be so crooked?"

"He's sure a natty dude. You know the driver?"

"Maynard Stiles, otherwise known as Moose Maynard. He used to wrestle, they called him Mean Maynard the Mountain Man. An eighth of a ton of malice. Okay, they're inside. Moose is taking a right at the corner, which means he's going down the alley. They'll be using the back door to get away. Come on."

They went out the back, and while Lelchuk examined his Smith & Wesson .38 in the wan footlight of the moon, Ritter called for backup, code three.

"Which end of the alley do you want?" Lelchuk asked.

"Moose went in the north side,

so we better do the same. I don't want to be facing the car. If he flashes his headlights we'll be blinded."

They moved quietly around the store and across the street. Ritter withdrew his Colt Python and kissed the barrel. Slowly they worked their way to the alley entrance, then stood with their backs to the brick wall.

"Wait till you hear them come out of the store," Ritter whispered, "then take the other side."

Lelchuk was breathing rapidly.

"You're going to hyperventilate," Ritter said. "Take it easy."

The back door opened and footsteps sounded in the alley. Lelchuk darted across the alley. "Police!" Ritter shouted as he stepped into the entrance, gun locked in front of him. Cosso stood by the car's open rear door; Jackson crouched behind him. "Hands on the roof," Ritter yelled. "Get out of the car, Moose, and raise 'em high."

The left front door opened and a thick arm went up into the air. Then the bulky torso twisted suddenly and a flash exploded from Moose's right hand. Lelchuk fell backward, sending a bullet into the side of the building as he fired reflexively. The wrestler quickly turned his weapon on Ritter, who dropped to one knee and shot at the same time, his bullet thudding solidly into the wall and rupturing brickwork only inches from the big man's face. Jerking toward the car, Moose fired wildly at Ritter, then ducked back behind the wheel.

Cosso and Jackson lunged into the car and Ritter pumped two slugs into the trunk without thinking. The noise of the shots reverberating from the close walls was ear-shattering, but he was hardly aware of the noise. Moose gunned the engine and Ritter blasted again, smashing the outside rearview mirror. He braced his arms and took aim, squeezing the trigger slowly with an even, straight pull, as steady as if he were on the target range.

He shot into the car. Immediately the horn blared as if in answer to the thundering of his weapon, and the car rammed into a trash bin near the mouth of the alley and stopped, horn screaming.

He glanced at Lelchuk, then in a crouch worked his way down the alley, blinking his eyes against the smoke. "Cosso!" he yelled, trying to make himself heard over the drone of the horn. "Fast!" The rear window bore a jagged hole from which radiated long cracks intersected by other cracks, making a design like a spider's web. The stench of cordite hung in the air like toxic fog, an acrid odor that stung his nostrils and always reminded him of death. His mouth was dry as parchment.

Moving cautiously around the side of the car, he saw Moose's large frame slumped against the steering wheel, Jackson's lanky one in the passenger seat, hands raised, and Cosso's small body huddled on the floor in the rear.

"I don't have a gun," Cosso

whimpered. "I don't have a gun."

Ritter jerked the door open. "Move," he said, and Cosso scrambled out. Ritter shoved him against the car, cracking his chin against the roof, and patted him down. "Now you, Fast."

The tall man got out, put his hands on his head and walked backward to Ritter, who searched him for a weapon before cuffing him to Cosso and making them lie face down in the dirty alley. Then he heard, above the din of the horn, the wailing sirens of the patrol cars, and he put his gun away, took out his badge and hooked it to the breast pocket of his coat.

One car, its rooftop lights whirling and flashing, squealed to a stop in front of him, blocking the alley, and another roared behind him, closing off that exit. With red and blue epileptic fits of light from the fireballs splashing in circles up and down the alley and the blare of the horn, he felt a sense of bedlam, that he was moving in an atmosphere of madness and surreality—life with a hallucinatory edge. The air itself, alive with smoke and strobeflike color, seemed panicky, and he raised his arms as the patrolmen darted toward him with their weapons drawn.

"Code four," Ritter shouted. "It's over." He went around the car, reached in the driver's window and pulled Moose off the steering wheel. The horn stopped. Blood oozed down the back of the wrestler's neck where the bullet had entered at the base of his

skull. Ritter pushed him over in the seat, not wanting to look at his face—or what was left of it. From the floor mat he retrieved the gun, a Bulldog .44, and stuck it in his belt.

"This guy's dead," a young officer yelled from the far end of the alley.

"Hear that, Cosso?" Ritter snapped as two patrolmen helped the men to their feet. "You're facing a murder rap."

Cosso was sweating, his clothes were soiled, and he no longer looked dapper. "I didn't shoot him and you know it." His eyes were bright and his face glistened like a freshly scraped potato.

"Doesn't matter who pulled the trigger, you were all in commission of a felony when it happened. Multiple felonies, to make it tight. You've got a murder charge wrapped around you like a strait-jacket, and that's a lot of bind." Ritter took the pasteboard box out of the car and with quivering hands dropped it at Cosso's feet. "Not to mention five keys of number three, which is good for a bunch of calendars by itself." He opened the box and showed its contents to the uniformed men,

then said, "Take them down, I'll be along later."

Shoulders drooping, Ritter turned and slogged down the alley to the mouth where Lelchuk, beyond caring, was sprawled on his back, neck drenched with blood, mouth and eyes open. "Get a blanket," he said to the rookie cop hovering behind him.

The young policeman quickstepped to his car and opened the trunk. Seconds later he had a gray blanket but hesitated to drape it over the body.

"He's one of us," Ritter said, taking a deep breath and kneeling beside the lifeless form. "Or was." He pulled Lelchuk's left arm alongside his inert body, then moved the right one, hand still around the .38, fingers lax. After positioning the arm and gun the way he wanted, Ritter placed his hand on Lelchuk's still chest as if his touch had some meaning or could give comfort, to himself if not to the dead man. Ritter's mind seemed to race out of control, to spin wildly, then stop at nothing, like a slot machine full of blanks.

"No luck," he murmured. "No luck at all."

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# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the January issue.*

Sergean Larry Largent and Corporal Chico Caporale gave the meeting their full attention.

"At last," began Chief Sharif, "I have reliable information on the whereabouts of Romaine Barr, the cocaine czar, and his wife, Della, the dealer. They are living right here in our city in a posh condo in Lauer Tower and using the last name Unser."

"Want us to make an arrest?" Sergeant Largent asked.

"It's not quite that simple, I'm afraid," replied the chief. "They are experts in disguise, and they may have altered their appearances through cosmetic surgery. And, if you two go barging in like the place is on fire, they may make a quick getaway. No, I want you to be *absolutely* certain when you make the arrest."

"Any suggestions?" Corporal Caporale asked.

"Use your imaginations!" exploded the chief. "It's vital that you act quickly, but I guess you know that. Now, get going."

As they left the office, the sergeant remarked, "That's a pretty ritzy place, that Lauer Tower. Got any ideas, Chico?"

"Hm-mm . . . What do rich people fear most, Larry?"

"Income taxes?"

"Nah. What they're most afraid of is gettin' robbed. So, we'll pretend we're just out there to warn them to take certain precautions. Let's hope it works."

Largent phoned ahead to one of the residents and explained their "reason" for coming. The cultured feminine voice replied, "Sir, our husbands are away on business."

"That's quite all right, ma'am. We just want to make certain that you ladies are adequately protected. Certain criminal types have been seen in your vicinity."

"Oh dear. That's dreadful!"

"So, if you could be so kind as to assemble the wives living in your building this afternoon," continued the sergeant, "we can meet with all of you at once."

"I'm sure we can arrange our schedules for that."

"Excellent. By the way, I didn't catch your name."

"Mrs. Shultz. That's spelled S-H-U-L-T-Z."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Shultz. My partner and I will be there shortly."

They drove out to Lauer Tower, an imposing seven-story structure, and parked the squad car in the circular driveway. They were met at the doorway by a carefully coiffured and elegantly dressed lady.

"I'm Mrs. Shultz," she declared. Beyond her in the lobby were six other fashionably dressed ladies, all smiling with fixed smiles.

The sergeant introduced himself and the corporal.

Mrs. Shultz smiled coquettishly and led the two officers around the circle of ladies. "Our first names are Helen, Irene, Julia, Kathy, Laura, Maria, and Nora," she said. "Now Sergeant, what information do you have to impart?"

"Well, we know that Lauer Tower has the finest burglar alarms possible," began Largent, "but a clever thief can disable them with little effort. The main purpose of our visit is to learn where each of you resides. That would be very helpful if we should get a sudden call for help from any one of you."

"That is an excellent suggestion," chimed in one of the women. "One can't be too careful. Well, to start, one couple is on each floor. Our husbands are named Albert, Bart, Carl, Dan, Earl, Fred, and George. They include an artist, a banker, a contractor, a dentist, an engineer, a florist, and a jeweler."

"Very well," Sergeant Largent said. "Now if you will each state where you live in the building, Corporal Caporale will take notes."

1. Kathy volunteered to speak first. "My condominium is just above that of Mrs. O'Hara, which is just above the home of the lady from Utah. We are married to Albert, Dan, and Earl (in some order), but none of us is married to the artist."
2. Nora was next. "I live just below Mrs. Turner, who lives more than one floor below Dan's wife. Our husbands include the engineer, the florist, and the contractor (who isn't Mr. Perdue)."
3. Laura spoke: "To begin, sir, I am the wife of neither the dentist nor the gentleman who lives on the top floor. My condo is just above that of Earl's wife, which is just above that of the lady from Virginia. Our last names are O'Hara, Queen, and Rankin, but not necessarily in that order."
4. Julia added: "I'm not the contractor's wife. Dan's wife, Mrs. Rankin, and I are from Tennessee, Utah, and Texas (in some order). We occupy the even-numbered floors."
5. Helen then declared: "My condominium is just below that of the lady from Wisconsin and just above that of Bart's wife."



None of us is married to the engineer or the man from Texas."

6. Irene then took her turn. "Albert (who isn't the jeweler), the man from Pennsylvania, and my husband occupy in some order the floors 1, 3, and 5."
7. Maria, who had been listening attentively, said: "My husband isn't the artist. Mr. Turner, by the way, isn't George, and he isn't the gentleman from Michigan."

"Well," said Corporal Caporale, looking up from his notebook, "everything seems quite clear so far. But perhaps some of you might like to add a little to your previous statements?"

8. Nora said, "Just this, sir: Irene, Kathy, and I are the wives of Fred, Mr. Queen, and the gentleman from Tennessee (in some order)."
9. Kathy then added, "To keep your records straight, I'm not Mrs. Shultz, and neither of us is married to the contractor."

The corporal folded his notebook, bowed gallantly, and thanked the women in the lobby.

As they seated themselves in the squad car, Largent growled, "Chico, why the hell did you stop quizzing them? Nobody even mentioned the name Unser."

"They didn't have to, Larry. I'd already figured out what floor Romaine and Della Barr are on and what first names they're using. We'll return tonight with warrants and some backup."

*What are the aliases used by the cocaine czar and his wife?  
On what floor of Lauer Tower do they live?*

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See page 112 for the solution to the November puzzle.

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FICTION

# THE BOND MARKET

R. T. Lawton



*Illustration by Steve Lawton*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/02*

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**“W**hat we have here is a personal recession!” Cletis Johnston, proprietor of the Twin Brothers Bail Bonds, slammed the newspaper down on top of the rich mahogany desk in his private office. Without pause, he continued his monologue.

“We need to do something immediately, even if it means taking matters into our own hands.”

Theodore Oscar Alan Dewey, bail agent for the company, having no idea why he had been summoned into Cletis’s inner sanctum, flinched as the newspaper smacked on the highly polished wood surface. In all his ten years at the company, Theodore had learned that when the proprietor got this angry, someone was going to pay and pay dearly. Theodore instinctively protected his now permanently rigid left little finger, glistening with the two-carat yellow diamond pinky ring, and hoped it wouldn’t be him again. Therefore, he listened quite carefully to Cletis’s next words.

“We haven’t had a special client in four months now and there’s the reason why.”

Theodore turned the newspaper around so he could read the front page. The headline blared:

#### FBI CLAIMS CRIME RATE DOWN

“How can we expect to continue in business if there are fewer high-caliber criminals being caught at work? It’s time for us to go proactive. We need to start aggressively recruiting our own clients.”

Theodore felt a mild rash of perspiration breaking out on his pale, balding head. When the proprietor came up with these types of projects, it meant that Theodore’s stomach was always put on alert. At this rate, he’d have to acquire another bottle of antacid tablets before lunch. Therefore, it was with some trepidation that he made his inquiry.

“What exactly did you have in mind, sir?”

Cletis smoothed the lapels on his sophisticated charcoal-gray shantung silk suit, a color several shades lighter than his midnight skin. He then proceeded to brush a stray mote of lint from his shirt in hues of dusky rose, subtly accented by his tie in mother-of-pearl tones, before continuing with the conversation.

“It has come to my attention that a courier of bearer bonds for a particular shelf company will be spending the night in our city. I happen to have the name of the hotel and the room number that he will be staying in.”

“Pardon my ignorance, sir, but I’m not familiar with bearer bonds.”

Cletis steepled his fingertips in front of his chest in the manner of a lecturing college professor.

“A bearer bond is a bond which does not have the owner’s name reg-

istered on the books of the issuing company, but which is payable to the holder of the bond."

Theodore's bulbous eyes brightened.

"So it operates the same as cash."

"I wouldn't recommend using one to purchase a hamburger at your local restaurant, but you do have the basic concept. Now that we're at it, can you tell me what a shelf company is?"

Theodore's short, stocky body turned fidgety on him. Unsure if there was a penalty for having the wrong answer to the proprietor's question, he mopped his balding head with a white-on-white silk handkerchief.

"No sir, but I'd be glad to learn."

Cletis paused as if considering a matter of great importance to the future. Then, apparently having made up his mind, he proceeded with the necessary information.

"On certain Caribbean islands there are offshore banks, some no larger than a closet, that will, for the right price, sell anyone a complete start-up corporation. Said bank provides the purchaser with a set of incorporation papers, one out of many sets that the bank keeps on a shelf in their closet. Hence the term *shelf company*. The purchaser maintains silent ownership of this instant company and since the board of directors is made up of relatives of the Caribbean banker, law enforcement agencies back in the States are rarely able to obtain any corporation records. Money flows to the island bank and is laundered back into the U.S. through a series of corporate entities to someone that appears on the surface to be a regular, law-abiding citizen."

"I see," said Theodore, not really sure he understood the intricacies of *any* money laundering scheme. "How does this affect our problem?"

Cletis unsteeped his fingers.

"This particular company, to remain unnamed, currently finds it convenient and necessary for their operation to periodically transfer large monetary assets from one part of the country to another without leaving a paper trail for the IRS to follow. Thus the company sends a courier with the bearer bonds from one city to another, as business requires. Only four people are aware of the route and schedule: the sending financial officer, the courier, the bodyguard, and the receiving financial officer."

"Pardon me for saying so, sir, but obviously a fifth person is also aware of this situation."

"Quite right, Theodore, but he's dead now."

"No sir, I was referring to yourself. Who's the dead guy?"

"The deceased was the former courier for said corporation up until his unexpected demise. It seems that after one of his runs was completed, he had the misfortune to drunkenly accost the young tro-

phy wife of our longtime mayor in one of our better restaurants. He was subsequently arrested for disturbing the peace. Fortunately for us, I had overheard some of his prior conversation about current business with his associate and was intrigued enough to go his bail. In his inebriated state, he gratefully related the full nature of his profession. Tragically, within the hour of getting out on bond, his body collided with a speeding taxicab outside the white lines of a crosswalk."

"Taxis are a dangerous weapon in this city," commiserated Theodore.

"One should always stay within the lines," added Cletis.

"So what do we do now?" asked Theodore.

"I believe we require a thief with the special talents of operating within a hotel environment. Get our burglar files from the outer office. Choose men that you know personally, especially those that have not been apprehended more than once. A repeat offender on the police records tends to be an indication of sloppy work. Something I will not tolerate, as you well know."

"Yes sir, Mr. Johnston."

Theodore hustled out of the inner sanctum as fast as his short, stocky body would take him. Ten minutes later, he returned with three files in hand and presented them to his boss.

"These are three of the best, sir: Rupert McMurdock, Mario Asario, and Sergi Kulanov. I've had dealings with all of them."

Cletis took time to peruse the files while Theodore remained standing. Apparently satisfied with what he read, Cletis closed the file folders and stroked his long black, silky mustache as he appeared to consider his options.

"Theodore, I want you to approach these men and find one who is interested in doing this job."

"What do you want me to tell them?"

"Explain that how they do the job is up to them. They know what methods work best for their abilities."

"What details can I provide?"

"Tell them that a courier and his bodyguard will arrive at the Monteleon Hotel tonight at eight o'clock. The Monteleon, for your edification, Theodore, is one of the few grand, old-time hotels still remaining in our Bay City area. Fortunately for our purposes, the hotel owner's old-world concept of management has resisted the technological changeover from key locks to electronic card locks on their doors. Here's the number for the hotel suite that the corporation reserves for their courier. It's the same suite of rooms every Thursday for every trip."

Cletis shoved a typed note across the desk before continuing.

"The target corporation operates under the policy that one man by himself should not attract undue attention; therefore the armed

bodyguard stays several steps behind the courier during travel and will be lodged for the night in the hotel room directly across the hall from the courier. Normally, the courier leaves the briefcase containing the bearer bonds in his room while he goes down to the restaurant for supper. During this time, the bodyguard keeps an eye on the front door of the suite. When the courier comes back, the bodyguard goes to eat. The next morning, the bonds are delivered to the receiving corporation. Our burglar can choose his own time and place for the theft. Any questions?"

"Yes, sir. What does our man do with the bonds after he obtains the briefcase?"

"Make arrangements for our pet thief to meet with you the very same night and hand over the bonds."

"And what shall I say he stands to receive as remuneration for his labors?"

Cletis cocked one eyebrow and stared straight into Theodore's lumpy face.

"Remuneration is rather a large word for you, Theodore. You must be practicing your word of the week again."

Theodore opened his mouth to reply, closed it, then opened it again before finally opting for the wiser decision of silence. He ducked his head.

After a couple of minutes, Cletis continued the conversation.

"Back to business. Face value for the bonds should be in the neighborhood of eight hundred thousand dollars. I shall assume the thief is intelligent enough to do simple math, so imply that we will pay him fifty percent of whatever we sell the bonds for. Subsequent circumstances will not require that we pay him anything, but he doesn't need to know that; therefore you may negotiate any deal he wants. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Theodore lowered his head even further and nodded before leaving the room.

**E**arly the next morning, Theodore was once again summoned into the private executive office of the proprietor. Cletis left Theodore standing uncomfortably on the expensive Oriental carpet for several silent minutes before condescending to notice his presence. Finally, he slid the morning newspaper across the desk.

"I see there was a small problem."

Theodore glanced at the headline:

#### MAN MURDERED IN HOTEL ROOM

"I assume, Theodore, that you received the bonds from the burglar whom *you* personally picked out to do the job?"

"Whoa, no sir. I mean, I waited in the hotel bar for him to make delivery, but he never showed."

"I expect not, but weren't you maybe a little bit curious enough to have checked on the location of his presence? Perhaps even given me a call about the situation?"

"It's like this, Mr. Johnston: when the police showed up in force, I didn't think it would be conducive for a member of our bonding company to be on the scene of whatever police action was going on. So I gave him a few more minutes, then left by the side door. We've had no contact since. Sorry I didn't call you at the time. I had no wish to disturb you that late at night and thought it would wait until this morning."

Cletis contemplated the situation.

"Very well then, since it turns out that the police did make arrests in the hotel, give me our burglar's name and we'll see about bonding him out. With special conditions, of course."

Theodore ducked his head, wishing he were a million miles away.

"I don't know his name, sir."

The Oriental features of Cletis's eyes narrowed even more than normal.

"What do you mean you don't know his name? You picked him."

"Yes sir, but I knew you wanted the deal to go, so I made the offer to all three men individually. That way, I figured one of them would take the job, and whoever did would bring the bonds back to me. Under the present circumstances, I would hazard a guess that whichever of the three got arrested is the one we need to deal with."

In the ensuing silence, Theodore could hear the soft chugging of the coffeepot in the outer office. His heartbeat, pounding in his ears, raced through his temples in a rapid crescendo until Cletis broke the morgue-room stillness. Theodore strained to hear the low spoken words.

"According to the newspaper, the police arrested three men in white room-service jackets as the possible murder suspects. I believe you'll find all three of your burglars' names listed in the right-hand column as being apprehended in the hotel."

"Sorry, Mr. Johnston, I didn't know that. What can I do to make it right?"

"I am very aware of your ignorance, Theodore. Fortunately, I had my friend, the precinct captain, send over copies of the investigative reports early this morning in hopes that maybe we could make some sense out of this mess. Get the large manila envelope off the secretary's desk, bring it here, and extract the necessary paperwork."

When Theodore had returned, Cletis gave him his next orders.

"Paraphrase the reports for me. All I want are the important details. Start with the bodyguard's statement."

Theodore shuffled the papers until he found the one he wanted.



"Sir, the bodyguard stated that their airplane was delayed due to air-conditioning problems before and during the flight. Thus they arrived at the hotel a sweaty half hour later than usual last night. The courier decided to take a shower before supper, so the bodyguard waited across the hall. At one point, the bodyguard thought he heard the telephone ringing in the courier's room, but the guy must've already been in the shower and ignored it. Five minutes later, the guard heard a noise and went to look out the security peephole in his door. Room service was standing in front of the courier's door. The guard, who was hungry, thought that meant he could go to supper sooner."

"What did he say about the actions of the room service waiter?"

"The guard said the courier's door came open, then stopped as if the security chain was in place. The door partly closed for several seconds then opened all the way like the chain had been removed, so the waiter rolled the service cart into the room and the door shut. Less than ten minutes later, the door opened, the waiter came out and stood in front of the now almost closed door as if talking to someone inside the room, then the door closed and the waiter rolled away the service cart."

"Did the guard see the waiter's face?"

"No, the waiter had his head down as he rolled the cart out of the room."

"What happened next?"

"The guard's stomach was rumbling, so he decided to telephone the courier and see how long it would take him to finish eating. When the call wasn't answered, the guard became worried, crossed the hall, and knocked on the door. Nothing. He tried the door and found it was locked, so he telephoned for hotel security."

"What did hotel security say about the situation?"

Theodore searched for the correct report and placed it on top of the other paperwork.

"The courier's room is on the nineteenth floor, which is the top floor of the Monteleon Hotel. One security officer just happened to be checking out the stairwell of the floor below, so he ran up the stairs and into the hallway. Since the courier's room is nearest the stairwell, the officer didn't have far to go. Unlocking the door with a master key, the security officer saw the chain was in place. He and the bodyguard then forced the door, breaking the chain mechanism, and entered the room. They found the courier lying on the floor with his head bashed in. A loaded pistol was on the bed and an empty briefcase was on the nightstand. When the bodyguard happened to mention the room-service waiter, the security officer radioed his men to detain everyone in a white room-service jacket. They also telephoned the police who responded immediately."

"I think I see where this is going. Now read the report of the sergeant taking charge of the crime scene."

Theodore rustled through the papers.

"It appears that the courier had just come out of the shower. His hair was wet and he was wearing a bathrobe. As best they could tell, someone had evidently crushed his skull with a brass lamp stand. The sergeant was puzzled by several facts. One, the hotel windows are not the kind that open, which is a moot point since there is no fire escape outside the window. Two, there are no adjoining doors to this room. And three, the only door into the hall was locked and still had the security chain in place when the door had to be forced from the outside. Yet, somehow the man had been mysteriously killed while alone inside the locked room."

Cletis nodded his dark, shaved-bald head in appreciation.

"I have no doubt the Homicide dicks will soon figure that one out, but they may need some help from the Vice Squad."

"How do you mean?"

"Not yet, Theodore, I'm concentrating. Now tell me about the arrest of your three pet burglars."

Theodore mentally shrugged, then sought out the necessary facts.

"Hotel security quickly determined that it had three extra men dressed in white room-service uniforms, but none of these three was employed by the hotel. Each of the extras was wearing white cotton gloves. The first one, Rupert, was detained in the kitchen where he was in possession of one of their room-service carts. Later, Mario was found with a cart in the elevator used by the hotel guests. And Sergi was located in the service elevator, also with a cart. Hotel security had thrown the circuit breakers for power to all elevators, which froze them in place until they could be searched. That's how they got Mario and Sergi."

"Were the elevators going up or down? That would tell us something about those two."

"Sorry, sir, when the power was turned off, it became impossible to tell which direction the elevators were headed."

"I see. Well then, what objects were on the men when they were searched?"

"None of them carried any identification and none of them had the bonds in their possession. Mario had only a twenty dollar bill and some coins in his pockets. Rupert and Sergi each had a small amount of money, a set of master keys that fit the doors of several local hotels, plus a wide strip of metal about two foot in length."

"Describe this metal strip."

"Well, sir, each strip had tape on one end for a handle, and had a couple of bends in the middle and a series of cutouts in the other end. Rupert and Sergi said the metal strips were kitchen tools the chef uses for removing lids from hot pans, so the cops left the strips lying on the kitchen counter."

Showing no outward emotion, Cletis nodded his head again.

"I assume all the carts were searched?"

"Right."

"And the entire kitchen area where Rupert was apprehended?"

"Nothing there."

"The elevators?"

"Clean. They even checked out the trapdoor in the ceiling and the top of the elevator. There were no other passengers with these two men when they were arrested."

"Okay, take me back up to the corridor on the nineteenth floor. Give me the facts on that search."

More paperwork was shuffled. Theodore's throat was dry and he wished he had a drink. Nothing so simple as coffee or water, he wanted something with lots of alcohol and ice in it. His voice got drier.

"The dead man's room was gone over in great detail by the lab technicians. Nothing new there."

"I suspect not. Go on."

"Four cops, working in pairs, searched the rest of the nineteenth floor. It'd been a slow night at the front desk, so none of the other rooms had been rented out on the nineteenth floor, but each room was opened anyway and thoroughly looked through. Zero."

Cletis pondered the possibilities of this information.

"Still, you must admit that was a good move on the part of the police, since our killer was obviously a magician, a lock pick, or had a set of master keys to all the rooms. Now tell me about the layout of the hallway."

"There's not much left to tell here, sir."

"Details, Theodore, details. I don't think we've missed anything important so far, but the answers to some of our questions may well be in the insignificant parts of those reports."

"Yes, Mr. Johnston. Well, the corridor has the stairwell and death room at one end, with the guest and service elevators being located in the middle of the hall. There's a combination trash and cigarette ash container near each end of the hall, plus three large potted plants spread out along the carpet, no artwork on the walls, and a solid ceiling high enough up that it would require a tall ladder to reach the light fixtures."

"Go with the ashtray stand in the direction of the stairway."

Theodore used his hands to physically describe the appearance of the stands as he spoke.

"They're circular and about three feet high. The top is a chrome pan that holds sand and cigarette butts. There's a twelve-inch opening in the upper side of the stand through which people can dispose of their trash. Lift off the chrome top and there's a plastic liner inside the container to make it easier and more sanitary to empty the contents. At

the first stand, which is located closest to the courier's room, there were only two pieces of crumpled paper inside the liner, so that team of cops fished them out and read them. Nothing related to our situation."

"Okay, I assume the potted plants are next in line?"

Theodore shrugged his shoulders.

"Two of the potted plants were some kind of bushy green fern, while the third had large broad leaves like green elephant ears. One of the cops noticed a small pile of dirt next to one of the pots, so the searchers pulled all the plants out and looked inside and under the pots. Made a real mess on the carpet. The maid had evidently left a vacuum cleaner in the hall near one of the pots, probably to clean up the small pile of dirt they saw in the beginning. She'll really need the vacuum now."

"Did they search the vacuum cleaner?"

"Yeah, one of the teams finally thought of that. All it did was make the mess worse. They didn't find anything."

"And the ashtray stand toward the other end of the hall?"

"The inside of the second stand was full of paper, plastic bottles, pop cans, and discarded chewing gum, so that team of searchers pulled out the plastic liner and dumped the contents on the carpet. It was just plain old garbage. Also, just so you know, one team of cops looked under the first stand, while the second team checked underneath the other stand, in case there was a hollow spot on the bottom side of the cylinder. Nothing. We still don't know where the bonds are nor who killed the courier."

"Be quiet, I need to think."

Cletis leaned back in his executive office chair and stroked the sides of his mustache as he appeared to gaze off into the upper shadows of the office's dimly lit ceiling. Several minutes passed, leaving Theodore unsure as to whether or not he could safely wander off to sit in a chair along the wall. In the end, he decided the wiser course was to stand on the carpet in front of the desk waiting for the proprietor to come to a decision. Cletis finally lowered his gaze and fixed his eyes on Theodore.

"Listen closely, I want you to go to the Monteleon Hotel and speak to the chef that was on duty last night. Ask him about the food that was on the three room-service carts used by your burglars."

Cletis then pulled pen and paper from his middle desk drawer. With a quick flourish, he wrote a few words, folded the paper twice, and handed it to Theodore.

"You've already mismanaged this simple little operation once and I have no wish to put too much pressure on your laboring brain at one time. Therefore, do not open and read this note until you are through questioning the chef. At that time, follow the directions exactly as written, pick up the bearer bonds, and bring them directly back to me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, but how do you know where the bonds are?"

Cletis waved him away with the fingers of his right hand.

"Do as instructed and if I'm correct, I'll round out the story for you. Now be gone."

Three hours later, Theodore returned to the inner sanctum of the Twin Brothers Bail Bonds Company and placed a stack of bearer bonds on top of Cletis's executive desk.

"I'm totally amazed, Boss. What clue told you the location of the bonds?"

"Never mind that. What did the chef say about the food?"

"According to the chef, the food on Rupert's cart was still hot, so the chef went ahead and sent it up to the proper room with a real room-service waiter."

"Excellent," replied Cletis. "That eliminates Rupert. He wouldn't have had time to go upstairs, steal the bonds, commit murder, and get back to the kitchen with food that was still hot. What about the other two?"

"Sergi used a sham. The dishes on his cart contained the remains of a meal already consumed, thus the police assumed that Sergi merely went from floor to floor until he found a cart that diners had pushed out of their room and into the hall after they had finished eating. With the insulated covers over the dishes, anyone seeing them from the outside wouldn't know the food was already gone. As for Mario, the food on his cart was lukewarm."

"What did you find with the bonds?"

Theodore reached into his leather briefcase and removed a ring of keys and a thin strip of metal with cutouts on one end.

"These were on top of the bonds, sir."

"Excellent, Theodore, simply excellent. You do realize that Mario is our man?"

"Oh yeah. Sure. I suspected him right along of course, but I'm a little fuzzy on the murder, the locked room, and how you knew where the bonds were."

"Look at it this way, Theodore. Our three burglars, operating independent of each other, knew the courier's regular schedule because you gave it to them, but they didn't know the airplane was going to be late. One of them called the suite and having received no answer assumed incorrectly that the courier had already gone to supper on time. My guess is the caller was Mario, since he was obviously the first on the scene. Using the ruse of room service to allay the suspicions of the bodyguard, he unlocked the door with a master key."

"But how'd he get the security chain off the door?"

"Mario must've been surprised to find the chain engaged. He probably then knocked on the door or called out to see if anyone inside had heard him open the door. When he didn't get an answer, he made the

decision to go in anyway. That thin metal strip you found is bent in such a way that it can reach around the door. The cutouts in the far end catch the slide in the chain and release it from the door. Mario's back kept the bodyguard from seeing that part of the action. All the better hotel thieves carry those gadgets plus a set of master keys. I'm sure the Vice Squad will quickly provide this entry type information to the Homicide detectives working the murder."

"Which brings us to the body."

"Right. I speculate that the courier came out of the shower and caught Mario appropriating the bonds. The courier probably went for the gun on the bed and Mario panicked. Evidently, he subdued the courier with the brass lamp stand."

"How'd Mario latch the chain on his way out?"

"There's a notch on the metal strip that holds the chain slide in the correct position until you can re-engage it in the locking slot. On those doors where the chain is too short to work with, the burglar merely enters the room at a time when it's empty and replaces the existing chain with a longer one. No one seems to notice the length of the chain on their hotel door."

"And the bonds?"

"Mario was understandably upset at having murdered another human; after all, he is a burglar by trade, not an assassin. His first impulse would be to get rid of any incriminating evidence and get out of the hotel as soon as possible. I assumed that the police search was thorough in the locations they looked; therefore, using the process of elimination, I focused on the first cigarette stand. The patrolmen looked inside, saw two pieces of paper, checked them out, and went on with the rest of their search. At the second stand, that search team found lots of trash, so they removed the liner from the stand and poured the contents on the floor. Had the first team removed the plastic liner from inside the first cigarette stand, they would've found the bonds, the keys, and the burglar tool hidden underneath the liner. As it is, now we have everything. Rather a nice profit, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes sir. Does that mean we're finished with the case?"

"Theodore, we are a bail bond company, that's what we do. We can't very well leave your burglars in jail, now can we? Remember our company motto: When no one else will go your bail, we'll do you."

"I guess you're right, sir. What bail terms shall I offer them?"

"Inform Rupert and Sergi that I will eventually clear them as suspects on the murder charge if they will use their special talents to do a couple of jobs in another city up the coast. We can bond them out today and our company will arrange the airline tickets for their trip."

"Round-trip, sir?"

"I think one-way should suffice. I hate loose ends."

"But, sir, they'll be grateful for you getting them cleared on the mur-

der charge. They'd never say anything to the cops about us getting them to do the job in the first place."

Cletis tapped his neatly manicured forefinger on the desktop in aggravation.

"Theodore, gratitude has a very short half-life. Remember, you were their only contact on this job, so I make these final arrangements in your best interest. I am only thinking of your benefit."

Theodore shivered as if someone had walked on his grave.

"I appreciate that, sir, I really do. More than you know."

Cletis fixed Theodore in his gaze.

"No, Theodore, I think I do know."

To change the subject quickly to one less dangerous to his continued existence, Theodore asked, "What do we do about Mario?"

"Approach Mario with the proposal that we will bond him out tomorrow morning. That gives us time to get Rupert and Sergi out of town, yet not so long as to make Mario nervous enough to consider spilling his guts to the district attorney. Convince Mario that we have a new job for him. Then, call this number . . ."

Cletis shoved a business card across the desk.

"... and arrange for this particular taxicab to meet with Mario after he's bonded out. After all, he has to cross a street somewhere."

"Very good, sir. Then we go to the courthouse and retrieve all three bail bonds after their demise?"

Cletis leaned back in his chair.

"Well, Theodore, it is the company's money we will have invested to bail out the burglars. And it's too bad that money in and of itself won't have earned any interest for the firm, but you know, regardless of the nation's economic situation, I am really starting to feel good about the recent upturn in our current bond market."

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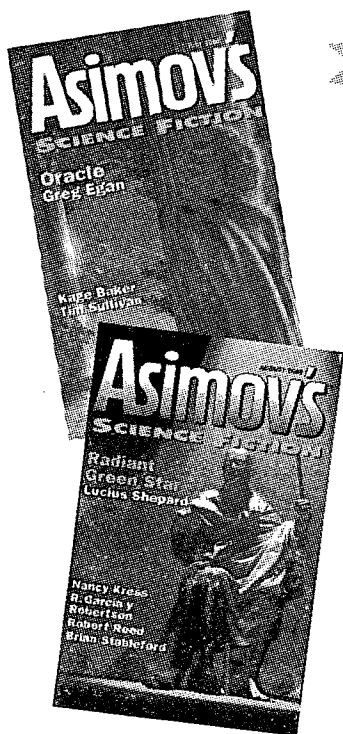
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Arthur and Gilda Lawson killed Edward and Delila Palmer.

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9	Charles Inch	Helene	Queens	Troy
8	Henry Kilmer	Agatha	Rochester	Utica
7	Bertrand Olson	Eileen	Windham	Rochester
6	Daniel Jones	Carmel	Valhalla	Queens
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# Eve Fisher

*Illustration by Kelly Denato*

And we've never had any of those animal rights activists, other than the yearly crop of students protesting against that and everything else their elders do. There's something that hits them



in high school, makes them crazy. This year they're piercing themselves something awful; you can't even look at them down at the Tastee-Freez without wondering how in the world they can stand to eat ice cream with all that metal on their tongues. . . . But they get over it, and the holes will close up and heal over, which is more than you can say for a tattoo.

Anyway, we all hunt and fish, and talk about hunting and fishing, and we buy pictures of hunting and fishing. Laskin's the proud home of Earl Nelson, who as anybody can tell you is one of the top wildlife artists of all time. His "Snow Geese Over Lake Howard" has sold thousands of prints. And the original of his "Snow Geese Sunrise" hangs in the courthouse.

Or rather, it used to. See, what happened was, well, remember I was talking about high school students? Well, back a few years ago, one of them, a boy named Dave Jacobsen, turned out to be a pretty good artist. Wouldn't think it to look at him. Big, burly kind of guy, and half-cousin to the Davison clan, so you wouldn't expect him to have any interest in any art other than maybe a little chain-saw carving on the side. My neighbor, Mr. Gustafson, did a real nice chain-saw carving of a squirrel on a stump. Course the squirrel's kind of big, but when you're working with a chain saw, you can't get much fine detail going.

Anyway, Dave did real well at art in high school, and he could

draw wildlife like you wouldn't believe. His mom, Mabel, took some of his work over to Earl to look at and Earl said he had promise. So Dave went on to art school, over in Minneapolis, but he came back home after a year. Said he didn't like the city, he didn't like the school, and he sure as heck didn't like his professors. That all might have been true, but he also couldn't afford it.

Dave came home and went to work down at the goose farm where, if nothing else, he could study goose anatomy in some detail. He painted at night. And come the State Fair, there were two paintings of Dave's right in there with Earl Nelson's, and you couldn't rightly tell which was whose, Dave's was so well done. Well, Earl got Best in Show and a couple of other prizes, as usual, but Dave won People's Choice for his "Slippery Morning," which showed a flock of geese flying over a frozen Lake Howard, coming in for a landing, three or four of them already down and one of them landing just slightly wrong and sliding on the ice. I'll tell you what, you've never seen a goose look so embarrassed. I took one look at it and I started laughing fit to be tied. You betcha. I voted for it myself.

Now I'd always liked Earl, and I thought he was a nice enough guy, but you know, he didn't take it kindly. The vote or the picture. Said the picture was nothing but a joke. Which it was, but that was the point, wasn't it? And it was done real good. But Earl didn't



approve of it, not one bit, and he talked about it all over town.

"There's some things you just don't joke about," Earl said. And a lot of people agreed with him or said they did.

The next dustup was at the Geese Forever Club's annual October Pancake Feed and Art Show. Earl had a new original he was going to make prints of, "Freedom of the Snows," with snow geese and snow drifts and a sunrise and a line of bare cottonwoods to show where the lake-shore was. Real Christmassy, and people were signing up like crazy for a print. And Dave had an original that he said *he* was going to make prints of, "Late Night, Early Hunt," with snow geese and snow drifts and a sunrise and a line of bare cottonwoods (only different than Earl's, of course) and a small group of hunters, who all looked a little hungover but happy and were banging away at the geese and getting them. And his prints cost only twenty-five dollars, not a hundred and fifty like Earl's. So people were signing up for that one, too, though not when Earl could see.

But Earl knew. And he wasn't happy at all. Oh, he talked good, about how there was room for both of them in the wildlife art world. But you could tell it galled him. I mean, here was this whipper-snapper half his age showing up at all the same shows and getting lots of attention, and who kept winning People's Choice.

"Oh, sure," Earl said, after Dave had won the popular vote at that

winter's Governor's Awards, "people vote for his stuff. It's humorous, if you like that kind of thing. But do they buy it? No. Can he make a living at it? No. He's young, he'll learn. A gimmick'll attract attention, but if you want to stay in for the long haul, you've got to have more than that to make folks pay their hard-earned dollars for your work."

After the Governor's Awards, Dave kind of dropped out of sight and spent all his time working by day and painting by night. Then spring came, and he quit the goose farm and got himself booth space at every fair, festival, and art show in South Dakota. He had prints of "Slippery Morning" and "Late Night, Early Hunt" and about ten other paintings he'd done. Granted, they weren't big prints, like Earl's, done down in Sioux Falls on an offset press or whatever they use these days. Dave was running them off his computer, so they were just eight and a half by eleven, and that's why he was charging so little. But they were all on glossy paper and looked real good, and every one of them had a joke in it or at least a smile, and at twenty-five bucks a pop, almost everyone could afford one. He did real well.

In the fall, he headed down to New Mexico, which is chock full of artists and art galleries and art shows. He did real well there, too, because when he came back to Laskin in February there was no talk about going back to the goose farm. Instead, Dave rented himself an apartment and said his



plucking days were over. He was just going to paint and do shows, like an artist should.

And Earl was looking more and more like a man with an ulcer. That March at the big Hunters' Exposition over in Mitchell, Earl still won top prize, but Dave once again won People's Choice. Dave was heard to say that he'd rather have the people rooting for him than the judges. Earl went over and took a long look at Dave's painting and kind of sniffed. "Nice coloring," he said. "But the boy can't draw people worth a damn."

And then it got nasty.

Dave had been painting like crazy down in New Mexico and he wanted to show everybody all of what he had done. So he decided to have an open house at his place, and he invited everybody in town. Especially Earl. Of course we went. Curiosity, interest, affection, free food.

But I'll tell you what, we were all in for a shock when we walked in because right there, as you came in the living room, hanging over the couch was this big painting that was nothing else but Earl's "Snow Geese Sunrise." The same one hanging in the courthouse. Only standing by the big cottonwood was no hunter in a camouflage hat and flak jacket, but a tall, blonde woman with nothing on but a pair of gum boots. She didn't look particularly cold, either. Dave called it "Nude With Snow Geese."

Earl about blew a gasket when he saw that, you betcha. He stood and stared at that painting and

you could about see the steam coming out of his ears. The rest of us were wandering around, looking at the other paintings. There were maybe a dozen regular pictures of geese and pheasants flying around, but there was also a bunch titled "Nude Hunting Pheasant," "Nude With Brook Trout," "Nude With . . ." Well, you get the picture. We certainly did. Dave had taken every hunting and fishing scene you can imagine and redone them with naked women in them. Poor Mabel could hardly tell where to look.

Dave was standing with a drink and a smile in front of "Nude With Brook Trout" when Earl walked up to him, thumbed back at "Nude With Snow Geese," and said, "That's my painting and you copied it."

"So sue me," Dave said.

Which is when Earl decked him. It barely rocked Dave, who was grinning from ear to ear, which of course just made Earl madder, so Joe Hegdahl got one side of him and I got the other, and we wrestled him out of the place. Outside we let him go and he let loose with a string of obscenities that seemed to calm him down some.

"Yeah, sure," Joe said. "Come on, Earl, let's go get a beer."

Over a pitcher of red beer, Earl suggested that Dave had done it on purpose to spite him, that Dave had it in for him, and that Dave was going to come to a bad end. We agreed with all of it. Eventually we got enough beer poured down him to take him



home on, and when we deposited him at his place he seemed likely to sleep.

It was the next day that the storm broke. It seems that one of the county commissioners had seen Dave's "Nude With Snow Geese" and had instantly decided that Earl's painting, "Snow Geese Sunrise," had to come down off the courthouse walls because what if someone came in who had seen Dave's painting and started making fun? Or worse yet, got offended? Now if the logic of that escapes you, let me assure you it escaped all of us, but this particular county commissioner was known for escaping logic entirely, so that was nothing new. He was also known for a temper about as equable as that of a Rottweiler with a boil on its butt, so when he made a decision that didn't cost money most people found it easier to do whatever he said. Down the painting came.

Earl, who had just gotten his mind made up to approach the matter with dignity and decorum, blew another gasket. He went to see Jim Barnes about suing Dave, the county commissioners, the courthouse, and the county. He was hopping mad. Jim, who's honest as they come for a lawyer, told him he didn't have a case. Now Earl was boiling mad. That night he went down to the Norseman's Bar and, instead of holding forth to all and sundry and letting it all out, sat at the bar and brooded over boilermakers, which never set well with him to begin with. Across the bar Dave was telling

Ron, the bartender, what a great idea it was to mix nudes with wildlife.

"You get the best of both worlds. Every guy likes naked women, every guy likes ducks. And geese and elk and everything else. So you put 'em together, you got sure-fire sales. I'm going to make a killing this summer in prints. You betcha."

From across the bar, Earl's growls built up into a long howl of outrage. "You—" Well, I can't print that. "You stole my painting! You stole my work!"

Dave looked across at him and said, "Mr. Nelson, the rules are that if you change something three ways, it's yours. I made it bigger, I did it in acrylic, and I put a naked woman in it. Tell me, how do you like the way she's drawn?"

Earl threw his glass across at Dave, who ducked, and glass and red beer went all over Ron's back wall.

Dave looked at the mess, said, "Get a life," and walked out of the bar.

Earl lunged across the bar, Ron grabbed Earl, and Dave was long gone. Ron worked on calming Earl down, and Earl claimed he was calmed down, but he was crazy mad. You could tell it the way he snarled and stumbled across the snow. And when he reached his truck, he wrenched the door open, pulled his thirty-aught-six out of the gun rack, and laid it beside him as he drove off into the night.

Dave was shot that night in his





studio, right in front of his new picture, "Nude Viewing Mount Rushmore." (Dave was branching out a little.) He wasn't killed, but the bullet went through his arm, nicked his chest, and nailed George Washington on the nose. His model, Melody Turner, went shrieking out into the night, which is why Dave didn't bleed to death. A naked woman running down the street doesn't need to be screaming to attract attention in a small town, and the cops and an ambulance were at Dave's in fifteen minutes.

Once the shock had let up, the general feeling in Laskin was that Dave had it coming, especially since he hadn't died and would still be able to paint. We all felt sorry for Earl, who'd been pushed to the breaking point, and only wished he'd managed to get a shot off at the county commissioner, too. Maybe one with more lasting impact. And we continued to feel the same way even after it was found out that all Earl had shot that night was a dead stump in his back yard.

You can't have the police and emergency technicians romping through your house without them finding stuff that maybe you don't want found. It seems that Dave, besides doing a fairly good business at selling prints at twenty-five dollars a pop, was also doing a very good business selling dope for considerably more. All those booths and shows were a real

good excuse for a lot of traveling and a lot of cash in small bills. As it turned out, the shooter was Fred Davison, Dave's second cousin twice removed, who hadn't liked his latest purchase, and I'm not talking about a print.

Dave's currently in the penitentiary in Sioux Falls doing five to ten. I took Mabel down to see him last Sunday. He was looking fit, and he swears he's learned his lesson.

"Once I get out of here, I'm going legit all the way," Dave said. "I figure I can make a living easy, selling prints over the Internet. You wouldn't believe the interest I've generated already."

"That's right, honey," Mabel said. "I shipped five orders of 'Slippery Morning' this week."

"See?" Dave said proudly. "I know I can do it." Later on, as we were leaving, he whispered to me, "I appreciate you bringing Mom down here to see me. If you'd like a print, say, one of the Nude series, Melody's running those out for me. Mom, well, they kind of embarrass her. Just let me know, Mr. Stark, and I'll be happy to let you have one for free."

Well, I couldn't do that. I'll have you know I paid for my copy of "Nude With Snow Geese." It's in my bedroom right now. I'd have put it up in my study, but I don't want it out somewhere that Earl might see it. He's a touchy sort of guy and you never know what'll set him off.



FICTION

# LOVE OUR LAKE


William T. Lowe



Illustration by Meredith Lightbown

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 12/02

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**A**t best it could only be called a minor tragedy, but it seemed to touch everybody in town—especially anybody who had ever lost a pet. These were the town's pets, and we had given them names, Lawrence and Lady.

They were beautiful ring-necked loons, and as loons do, they came back every year to a little cove in our lake. The same pair of course, because loons mate for life. People would make bets on when the ice would go out and on when the loons would arrive.

You could hear them at night if you parked at the town marina and took the path along the edge of the water. They would talk to each other, perhaps relating the day's news, or as some believe, predicting the weather.

During the long summer twilight a special treat for the kids was to be taken by boat out near the cove to watch the loons swimming together and diving for minnows. And to hear their mysterious calls, sometimes like a loud laugh, sometimes a long sorrowful wail.

Then the second week in June somebody shot one of the loons. It's against the law, they're protected wildlife, but somebody shot Lawrence, the male bird.

Two boys out fishing heard the shot and saw the loon struggling weakly in the water. They brought the body to the town dock, and Ed Willis called the troopers and the game warden. They searched the bank of the lake but found no trace of the shooter.

Ed and some of the parents asked me to look around and try to locate the person who did it. As a retired deputy they thought I might have some luck. From what the boys told me I figured out where on the bank the shot had come from. There was a path that led from a county road through thick pines down to the lake. I didn't find anything useful like fresh shell casings, just some blurred footprints.

I was convinced that the shooter had to be a local person. Someone who knew the loons were in that cove, someone who knew they were regarded as town mascots, yet was mean enough to shoot one of them. The shooting took place in early evening which meant that the man probably had a day job. And after my years on duty I knew the type he had to be—vain, none too bright, essentially a schoolyard bully.

He would crave some recognition for what he had done, the plaudits of his peers. Sooner or later he would boast about his achievement and I would hear about it.

In this I was disappointed. Gene Swepson and some of the other parents offered a sizable reward for information about the killer, but this only ensured his silence; he knew that his cronies at the service station and the Blue Ax would not let friendship stand in the way of collecting cash money for revealing his name.

After the church service on Sunday, Margaret Caswell asked me

about planning a memorial service. It had been her grammar school class that named the loons two years ago. "Just something simple," Margaret said. "Down by the boat landing at dusk. Just the children and their parents. We'll make a little boat and put candles in it and have somebody tow it out into the lake. We'll all sing something. What do you think, Hank?"

"Good idea, Margaret," I said. "Go for it."

A memorial service seemed appropriate. I thought it would be good therapy for the children. Right now they came down to the lake after supper before full dark and sat quietly, listening to Lady plaintively crying for her mate, as she did every night.

At the request of some of the parents I retrieved the body of the male loon from the state police, who had taken it for evidence. I borrowed a boat and went out to the cove and buried it deep beyond the water's edge.

Thus the parents could tell the children that Lawrence was sleeping by the edge of his beloved lake. But the kids still had questions. Can we find Lady another husband? Why did God let this happen? Have the police found out anything?

Fountain is a small town and our lake is our business. We don't have acres of valuable hardwoods like black cherry and red oak. We don't have snowmobile trails. We don't have a river like the Grasse that produces freshwater pearls.

But we do have a beautiful lake. It supports several campgrounds, bait and tackle shops, and convenience stores. There is a marina, where you can rent boats in summer and ice shanties in winter from Gene Swepson and take a ride in his seaplane anytime. You might say we love our lake because it takes care of us.


"I heard about that," one customer commented in Jake Hardestry's service station. He was looking at something in the window. Taped inside the glass was a child's crayon drawing of a loon, done in black and white, floating on blue water. Above it red letters said, "We miss you Larry."

The customer laughed. "I heard about that. Just a dumb duck that forgot to duck, eh?" He laughed again.

Jake's eight-year-old daughter had made the sketch. Jake frowned and stepped closer to the man. "It weren't no duck, mister. It was a loon. You got a problem with that?"

The man must have sensed the hostility in Jake's voice; he shook his head. "No, no problem." He opened his car door and got in. "Sorry about the bird," he said.

Ben Demming is the owner of the Blue Ax, the one and only tavern in Fountain. Privately I asked Ben to keep his ears open. "Some-



body at the bar may say something," I said, "some bastard who thinks he's a big man for killing that loon."

"Will do, Hank."

The night after the memorial service the Blue Ax had its usual crowd. The pool table in the rear was busy, the Dodge-Em game had a circle of players, a few beer drinkers lounged at the bar.

About ten o'clock Gene Swepson came in. He nodded at Ben but kept his head down, nursing a beer. He might have done better with his boat rental business and pontoon plane rides if he had set up on one of the larger lakes, but his wife has family here.

Gene has two young children at home, a boy and a girl, and recently he and his wife had spent hours trying to explain the concept of death. Tonight with the youngsters finally asleep, he told his wife, "Need some fresh air," and he left the house.

"No big deal," someone at the bar was saying. "It would have been an easy shot for anyone with a good scope. No windage on the water."

The words edged themselves into Gene's consciousness. He turned and looked at the speaker, a local man two spaces down the bar, talking to a companion. He was unshaven and dressed in work clothes.

"What did you say? About an easy shot?" Gene heard himself asking. "You talking about that loon that was shot?"

The man looked at Gene, noting his slight build, his clean clothes, his glasses. "Yeah, I said that." He shrugged elaborately, hoping his companions were watching the exchange. "No big deal."

His face white with anger, Gene took a step toward the man. "I'll tell you how big a deal it was! That's protected wildlife, and the minimum fine for shooting it is two hundred and fifty dollars!"

Gene's voice was rising; the room became still. "Shooting waterfowl with a rifle . . . that's another hundred dollars. And carrying a loaded firearm this time of year . . . another hundred! And firing a gun near a town road, that's another hundred. *No big deal*, huh?"

The man again shrugged with exaggeration, but Gene brought his face even closer. "And how about the kids in town? What do you think they feel about it? I'll tell you something else, mister. If I had my way they'd put that guy in jail and throw away the key . . ."

Smirking, the man cleared his throat noisily and, leaning forward, spat a gob of mucus on the floor at Gene's feet. He leaned back, looked around to see if his companions had witnessed the insult.

Gene stared at him for a few seconds. Then he reached out and seized the bottle of beer in front of the man. Deliberately he held the bottle out at arm's length, inverted it, and emptied the beer on the floor.

There wasn't a sound from the onlookers. The spitting had been the traditional insult; taking a man's drink away was new but equal in emphasis.

"You better get out of this town," Gene said in a low voice heard by everyone nearby. "Go live in a swamp somewhere."

"That's enough, Mr. Swepson."

Gene looked around to see Ben beside him, tugging on his arm. Ben led him to the door and saw him to his car. The Blue Ax was quiet that night and most of the patrons left early.

"That was Floyd Stanhill who Gene blew up at." Ben told me all about it the next day. "Floyd didn't say much after Gene left. He might be your man. Talks a good game when it comes to hunting. No, I don't know if he owns a gun."

Up to now my prime suspect in the loon shooting was a man named Curtis Cobb, a one-time petty thief who held a series of menial jobs and sponged off relatives. After the episode in the Blue Ax I did some research on Floyd Stanhill and I made a deal with Curtis Cobb.

I agreed not to push too hard on his shooting wild turkeys out of season if he would promise not to do it again, and if he would keep an eye on Floyd for me. Ben told me what Stanhill had said about using a telescopic sight to make the shot over water. If he didn't own a rifle he could have borrowed one.

As things stood I had to catch Stanhill with a gun in his hands.

Three nights later the phone rang after supper. It was Curtis Cobb. "Floyd's all likkered up," he told me, "been drinkin' steady. Says he goin' to get even with that town feller. I think he's carrying a gun . . ."

I thanked him and hung up. This could be the break I was waiting for. Stanhill had been shamed in public and his ego would cry for revenge. It seemed likely he would head for the Swepson's marina, and I had to get there ahead of him. *Maybe* he was carrying a gun . . .

Margaret was at home; I didn't call to tell her where I was going. On the way out the door I took a little Colt .22 pistol out of a cabinet and checked to see that it was loaded. I didn't know then how glad I would be to have it.

It was full dark when I got to the dock. Only one small bulb burned at the entrance; beneath it was a NO TRESPASSING sign. The area was deserted.

The dock stretched twenty yards out into the water; halfway down there was another light on a pole. Gene's single engine plane was moored parallel to the dock, fenders holding the pontoon away from the pilings. Even in the faint starlight the plane was a beautiful sight with its royal-blue color and white trim.

The plane was a big part of Gene's business and he was proud of it. In fact, all of us took pride in having a seaplane on our lake just like the larger lakeside towns had.

There was no sign of Stanhill, but I was sure he would come here.



Where could I hide and wait? There was a rowboat tied to a ring at the side of the dock; I stepped down into it and crouched with my head just above the planking of the dock.

I didn't have long to wait. Stanhill appeared under the light at the head of the dock. Empty-handed, no rifle or shotgun. He peered around, saw the plane, and began walking unsteadily toward it.

As he neared the plane I saw him draw a knife from his belt. Obviously he intended to slash the fabric of the plane's wings or fuselage. I took out my gun and held it against my leg. With my other hand I grasped the edge of the dock and tried to pull myself up. The rowboat slid away under my feet; I fell backward.

Stanhill hadn't heard me; he was muttering curses as he faced the plane. Suddenly he reached out with his knife and slashed a long hole in the fuselage behind the cabin.

"Hold it, Stanhill!" I yelled. I heaved myself part of the way onto the dock and pointed my gun at him.

He turned and saw me struggling to come to my feet. He grinned and took two steps toward me. He held the knife over my head, ready to plunge it into my back.

I shot him. I shot him in the right forearm between the wrist and the elbow. I intended it to be a warning shot but it struck his arm and he dropped the knife. He gasped with shock and surprise, then the pain registered and he began to sob. He sank down on his knees, clutching his right arm against his chest with his left hand.

"You shot me!" he cried, not believing that the aggressor could become the victim. He looked around frantically. "You shot me!"

"Stay right there," I ordered. I moved to stand between him and the head of the dock. "Stay on your knees."

I moved closer to him, my gun ready. Under his left arm I saw the handle of a pistol stuck in his belt. I reached down, pulled it loose, and put it in my pocket.

This was what I wanted, to find Floyd Stanhill carrying a gun. Now perhaps I could find out what happened that afternoon several days before.

I put the muzzle of my gun against his upper lip. Sometimes the smell of fresh gunpowder can induce honesty.

"Did you shoot that loon, Stanhill?"

"Damn you! I'm bleeding! Get away from me!"

I tapped the barrel of my gun against the bridge of his nose. He gave a choked cry; his eyes were wide with fear.

"Did you shoot that loon?"

"Yes! Yes! I want a doctor!"

I stepped back and threw him a handkerchief I happened to have. "Wrap this around your arm," I told him. "You're not hurt that bad. I'll call the rescue squad."

He did as I told him. I used my cell phone to call for help. We waited in silence. He didn't take his eyes off my little gun.

The ambulance was there in ten minutes, the troopers in twenty, as they had farther to come. By then Gene Swepson had arrived. I told him to check the damage to his plane and file charges in the morning.

We watched as Stanhill, his arm bandaged, was loaded into the back of the squad car and driven away. The troopers had taken his knife and his gun away.

Floyd Stanhill faced several charges that would result in jail time. Killing that loon was one of them. Another one was violation of probation. Two years ago he had been convicted on a domestic violence charge, a felony, and placed on probation.

Up here you can't own a firearm if you're on probation.

I didn't feel like going home right away; I went by Margaret's house and asked her to take a ride with me. As I drove back to the lake I told her what had happened at the marina. Then at the cove we walked down to the water's edge. A late moon was coming up and made a bright path across the water. We heard a loon cry in the darkness; it had to be Lady, mourning her lost partner.

"I'll tell you something if you promise to keep quiet about it," I said. "You promise?"

"I promise."

"I've been talking with a ranger I know in the Environmental Conservation office in Ray Brook. His group relocated some bears three years ago, and then the beavers. Last year they relocated those bald eagles in the High Peaks. Remember that?"

"I remember."

"He agreed that it wouldn't be a big deal to relocate a pair of loons. They could bring them over from Long Lake to our lake and release them right here. I told him it would mean a lot to the town and the children, and the new birds would be some company for Lady."

Margaret squeezed my hand. "Is it going to happen?"

I nodded. "Yes. Sometime this week."

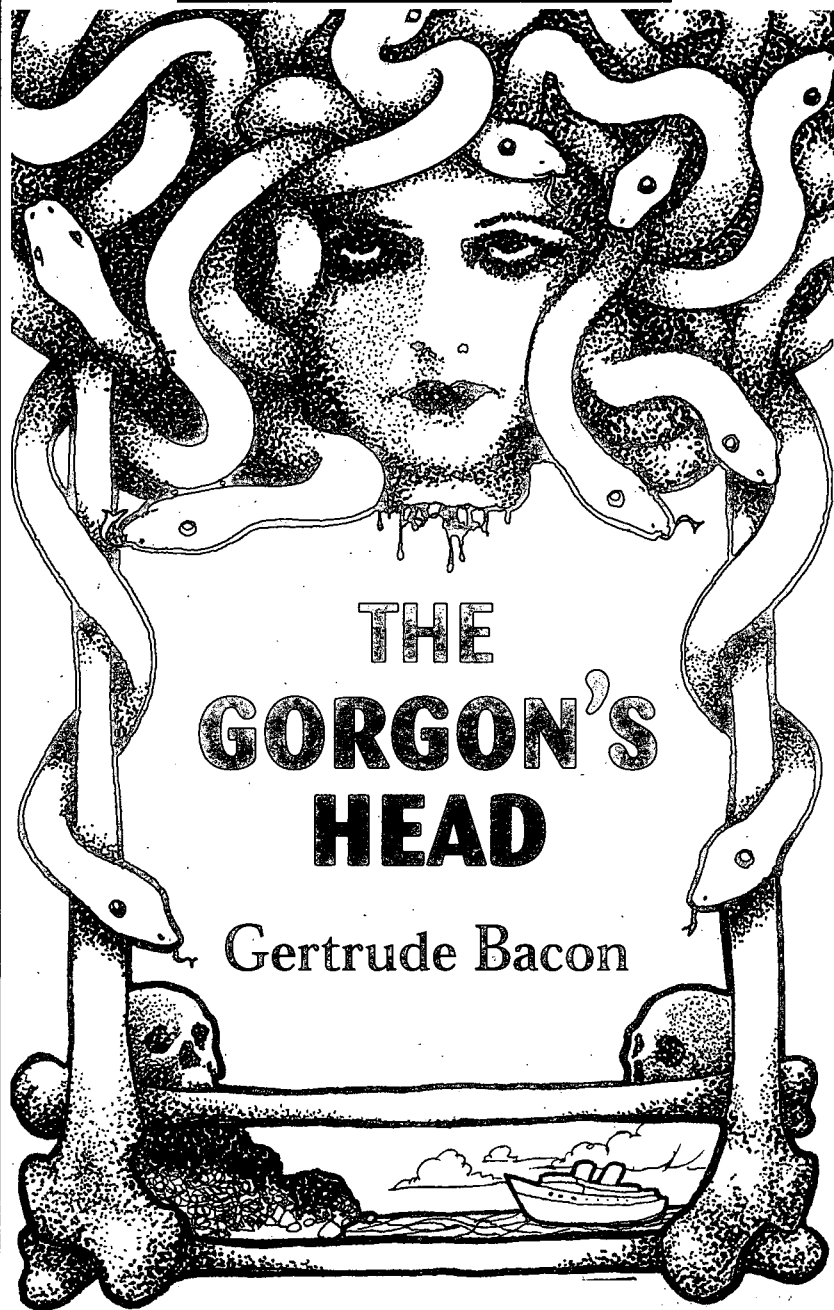
"Wonderful!" she said. "Thank you, Hank."

We sat in silence a little longer, listening to the night sounds. By now it was pretty late and tomorrow was a school day for Margaret. When we stood up to leave she looked out over the water.

"Good night, Lady," she whispered.



MYSTERY CLASSIC



THE  
GORGON'S  
HEAD

Gertrude Bacon

“**T**hey that go down to the sea in ships” see strange things, but what they tell is oft-times stranger still. A faculty for romancing is imparted by a seafaring life as readily and surely as a rolling gait and a weather-beaten countenance. A fine imagination is one of the gifts of the ocean—witness the surprising and unlimited power of expression and epithet possessed by the sailor. And a fine imagination will frequently manifest itself in other ways besides swear words.

Captain Brander is one of the most gifted men in this way in the whole merchant service. His officers say of him with pride that he possesses the largest vocabulary in the great steamship company of which he is one of the oldest and most respected skippers, and his yarns are only equalled in their utter impossibility by the genius he displays in furnishing them with minute detail and all the outward circumstances of truth.

I first learned this fact from the second engineer the evening of the sixth day of our voyage, as we leant across the bulwarks and watched the sunset. The second engineer was a bit of a liar—or I should say romancer—himself. The day he took me down into the engine-room he told me, as personal experiences, tales of mutinous Lascar firemen, unpopular officers who disappeared suddenly into the fiery maw of blazing furnaces, and so forth, which, whatever foundation of fact they may have possessed, certainly did not lose in the telling. As a humble aspirant in the same branch of art he naturally was quick to recognise the genius of that past master, the captain, and his admiration for his chief was as boundless as it was sincere.

“I say, Miss Baker,” he said, *à propos* of nothing, “have you had the skipper ‘on’ yet?”

“Not that I am aware of,” I said. “What do you mean?”

“Why, has he been spinning you any yarns yet? There isn’t a man in the service can touch him for stories. I don’t deny that he has seen some service, and been in some tight places, but for a real out-and-out lie, commend me to old Monkey Brand!” (It was by this sobriquet, I regret to say, suggested partly by his name, and mostly by his undoubted resemblance to a well-known advertisement, that the worthy captain was known in the unregenerate engine-room.)

“Oh, I should just love to hear him,” I cried. “There is nothing I should like better. Do tell me how I can manage to draw him.”

“Well, he doesn’t want much drawing as a rule,” said the engineer. “He likes to give vent to his imagination. Let me see,” he continued; “tomorrow afternoon we shall be about passing the Grecian Islands. Ask him about them, and try to get him on the subject of Gorgons.”

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*First published in 1899.*

"Gorgons!" I said. "What a strange topic! Why, since I've left school I have almost forgotten what they were. Weren't they mythological creatures who turned people into stone when they looked at them?"

"That's about it, I believe," said the engineer, "and a fellow called Perseus cut off their heads, or something of that kind. It's a lie anyhow, but you ask the skipper."

It was the custom of Captain Brander every afternoon to make a kind of royal progress among his passengers. Going the entire circuit of the ship, passing slowly from group to group, with a joke here and a chat there, and bestowing his favours in lordly and impartial fashion—especially among the ladies. I have watched him often coming the whole length of the promenade deck, making some outrageous compliment to one girl, patting another on the shoulder, even chucking a third under the chin; a sense of supreme self-satisfaction animating his red cheeks, curling his grey hair, and suffusing his whole short, portly person. Eccentric he was; indifferent to his personal appearance—his battered old cap had seen almost as much service as he had—but a more popular man or an abler officer never walked the bridge. On this particular occasion I was at the end of the deck, and had so arranged that an inviting deck chair stood vacant beside me. Wearied by his progress by the time he reached me, he fell at once into my little trap, and sat down on the empty chair, leant back, and spread his legs. He and I were fast friends, and had been since the day when I tried to photograph him, and he had frustrated my design by unscrewing the front lens of my camera and keeping it in his pocket for the rest of the morning.

"Captain," I said, pointing to a cloudy grey outline faintly visible against the eastern horizon, "what land is that?"

"My dear young lady," said he, "I am quite sick of answering that question! If I have been asked it once I have been asked it twenty times in the last half-hour. That old Mrs. Matherson in the red shawl buttonholed me on the subject to such an extent that I thought I should never get away again. Wonderful thirst for information that old party has! And she appears to think that because I'm captain I must have a complete knowledge of geography, geology, history, etymology, mythology, *and* navigation. Well, for the twenty-first time, then, we are passing the isles off the coast of Greece, and that one straight ahead is Zante."

"So that is Greece, is it?" I mused aloud. "Well, from here at least it looks old enough and romantic enough to be the home of all those ancient heroes we read about—Alexander and Hercules and—and—Gorgons and those sort of things." I felt I had introduced the subject somewhat lamely, after all, and the captain looked me full in the face as if suspecting a plot. But if I am not very adroit in con-

versation, I can at least look innocent upon occasions, and he merely said, "And what do you know about Gorgons, pray?"

"Oh, as much as most people, I expect!" I answered. "They are only a sort of fairy tale, you know."

"I am not so sure of that," said Captain Brander. "Those fairy tales, as you call them, have often truth at the bottom of them. And as to Gorgons, why, I could tell you a little incident that happened to me once—but it's rather a long story."

Then I urged my best persuasions—not that he needed much pressing—and pushing his old cap off his bald forehead, and speaking slowly and with that almost American accent peculiar to him, he unfolded his tale of wonder as follows:

"It's nearly thirty years ago, Miss Baker—that's long before *you* were ever born or thought of—that I was fourth officer of the *Haslar*, 2,000-ton vessel of this same company I serve to this day. How times have altered, to be sure! The *Haslar* was reckoned a fine ship in those days, and if you had told me that I should presently command an 8,000-tonner, such as I do this day, with 11,000 horse-power engines, and more men for the crew alone than the *Haslar* could hold when she was packed her tightest, I very probably wouldn't have believed you. However, that is neither here nor there. But thirty years ago in the spring time—now I think of it, it was in the month of April—we were cruising in this very neighbourhood, and one thick foggy night our skipper lost his bearings a bit, got too near the coast, and ran us ashore off the south point of Zante.

"Of course there was a great fuss, and everybody came up on deck with lifebelts, and all the girls screamed, and all the young fellows swore to save them or die in the attempt; and the skipper turned white as paper—not that he was afraid, for he was no coward—none of our officers are that—but because he knew his prospects were ruined, and he would be turned out of the company and perhaps lose his certificate, and he'd got a wife and a big family, poor chap! Of course that consideration didn't affect *me*, for I was in my bunk and asleep at the time, but it was certainly unfortunate for him.

"Well, it was very soon discovered that the ship wasn't going down in a hurry, and nobody got into the boats, though they were lowered ready. And when daylight came we saw we were fast on the rocks, with half the stern under water, and the saloon and a lot of the cabins flooded. But more than that the *Haslar* couldn't sink, and at low water you might almost walk dryshod on to the shore. There was no getting her off, however, and so all the passengers were landed and sent home as best they could across country, and a rough time they had of it, for Zante is not an over-hospitable sort of

a place; while we officers had to stick to the ship till we could get help, and then till she was repaired sufficiently to work her into dock somewhere.

"It was a tedious job, for help was slow in coming; and then all her boilers had to be taken out before she would float, and we fellows got jolly sick of it, I can tell you, for we were hard worked, and Zante is a wretched hole to spend more than half an hour in. Our one amusement, when we were off duty, was to go ashore on foot or row round the island in a boat, shooting wild fowl and exploring the country. There was precious little to see and not much to shoot, and it was slow fun altogether till, one day, the second officer came back from a tramp ashore and told us he had found his way to some very remote village on the eastern coast, where there was a cave among the hills which the villagers warned him not to enter. He could not gather for what reason, because he didn't understand enough of their outlandish tongue, but as it was then growing late he was obliged to return to the ship without further investigation.

"I was always one for adventure when I was a lad, and directly the second officer told his tale I made up my mind to go and explore that cave before any of the rest had a chance. It so happened that next day was my turn for going ashore, and I went and looked up one of the assistant engineers and persuaded him to come with me. I wanted him because he was a chum of mine, and also he was the only one of us who could talk the language a bit. He had been in those parts before, and generally acted as interpreter in our dealings with the natives. His name was Travers, a queer little dark chap, with black eyes and a hot temper, but a pleasant fellow enough if you did not rub him up the wrong way, and game for anything under the sun. He readily agreed to come with me, and we started as soon as we could get away, telling no one of our destination, for we had no wish to be forestalled.

"It was a long tramp, right across the island, to the village which Jenkins, the second officer, had indicated. But at last after climbing a weary hill, we looked down on some clustering huts standing amid vineyards in the valley beneath, while another and much sheerer cliff rose on the opposite side, whose rugged scarp was all rent and riven as by an earthquake, and intersected by a deep ravine. Here and there among the rocks were dark shadows and black patches which might be the entrances to caverns in the crag. 'This must be the place,' I said, 'and one of those is the forbidden cave. How are we to find out which?'

"As if in answer to my question, at this moment there came along the hill-top towards us a burly countryman with a sunburned face and tattered garments. He regarded us with astonishment, as well

he might, for they get few strangers in those parts, and he made some remark to us in his queer language, which, of course, I didn't understand, but Travers did and replied to it. Finding he was understood, the countryman stopped and talked.

"Ah!" he said, or so Travers interpreted. 'So you have reached the valley of the Haunted Cavern! It is far to seek and hard to find, but it lies spread beneath you.'

"But which is the Haunted Cavern, and why is it so called?" asked Travers.

"It lies in yonder cleft of the hills," answered the man, pointing to the opposite ravine, 'and it is called the Haunted Cavern because none who venture there return alive. Nay, they return not either alive or dead. They are seen no more!'

"Tell that to the Marines!" said Travers, only he translated it into Greek, of course, or what the Zante people think is Greek. 'You don't expect me to believe such a yarn as that! Why, what is there up in that place?'

"That is what none can tell," replied the peasant; 'for none come back to say. And, indeed, it is the truth I speak. Many men have attempted to find the secret. In bygone days, I have heard, a whole party of soldiers were sent there to search for brigands supposed to be in hiding, but not one was seen again. The cavern has an evil name, and now is shunned by one and all, but every now and again there arises a youth venturesome beyond the rest; and he heeds not the warnings of the old, but hopes to break the spell and find the treasure that some say is hidden there, and he starts in high hope and courage, but never again do we behold his face!'

"But what is the reason?" persisted Travers, the incredulous.

"Nay, that we cannot say," reiterated the man. 'A short distance can one go up the ravine that leads to the cavern. I have been there myself, and truly there is nothing that can be seen except a barren valley, scattered all over with big black stones. Nothing more, and farther than the entrance none must venture.'

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Travers, in delight, 'did you ever hear such an old liar? This beats anything I could have believed possible in the nineteenth century. Come on, Brander! We are in luck this time!' and the impetuous fellow dashed off down the hill, I at his heels, leaving the countryman dumb with amazement behind us.

"At the foot of the hill we entered the little village. An old, white-haired man of rather superior appearance was crossing the road before us. Travers accosted him and asked him the way to the Haunted Cavern. The old man turned quite pale with astonishment and apprehension.



"The Haunted Cavern, my son!" he said, in quavering tones; 'surely you are not going thither?"

"Yes, we are, though," said Travers, his eyes dancing with excitement. It is wonderful what enterprise that boy—he was little more—had in him. 'And if you won't tell us, we'll find the way out for ourselves!' and he pushed past the old man, who held out his skinny hands as if to detain him.

"Before we had got clear of the hamlet the news had somehow got circulated that we were about to explore the ravine, and the whole of the inhabitants turned out in the wildest excitement. Some were for staying us forcibly, till Travers began to get quite nasty, drew his revolver, and talked of firing. Many reiterated and emphasised alarming warnings and assurances that we should never return. All watched us with the most intense interest, and followed close on our footsteps until we began to near the fatal spot, when they fell off singly or in parties, till finally at the very entrance of the ravine we had left even the boldest spirits behind us.

"In truth, it was a strange spot to which we had penetrated. The narrow path had led us suddenly round the spur of the mountain, and now, look which way we might, the giant rocks towered up sheer above us, hundreds of feet high, in inaccessible grey walls. The sinking sun was now too low to shine within this well-like space, which his rays could only reach at midday, and the very air struck damp and chill. We were in an open valley, thus shut in by the cliffs, of considerable extent, but not to be reached by any path except that we had traversed. The ground was firm and smooth, but littered all over with the strangest black stones of all sorts of shapes, and in all positions, though of a fairly uniform size, and alike in material. There was something uncanny and weird about these queer black boulders, which strewed the valley the thicker the farther we advanced, till at the far end of the space, where a huge black hole yawned ominous in the cliff, they almost entirely blocked the way.

"The dark cavern looked terribly grim and forbidding in the fading light. A little stream issued from its mouth and trickled among the stones. It did not gurgle and glisten as most mountain streams, but flowed noiselessly, sluggish, and dull, and gathered in stagnant pools on its rocky bed. No birds sang in that dismal nook; no sound from without penetrated to its recesses. All was silent, dim, and chill as the tomb itself.

"Despite my utmost efforts, I felt the spell of the weird, wild spot stealing over me, and a cold shudder crept down my backbone. There was but room for one at a time in the ever-narrowing track, and I was at first leading. My steps became slower and slower, and



finally I paused altogether and turned to look back on Travers to see if he too was feeling the oppressive sense of evil that seemed to hang heavy in the very air. But in his face was only visible an ecstasy almost of eagerness and delight. His dark eyes sparkled again, his cheeks were flushed, his breath came quick, and his whole body was quivering with excitement.

"Go on, Brander!" he cried. "What are you stopping for, man? This is grand! This is luck, indeed! Did you ever see such a place? Come on, I want to get to that cave!"

"I felt utterly ashamed to confess my weakness, but it was that cave that I had begun to dread more and more. Whatever else I may be, Miss Baker, it is not boasting to say I am no coward. I have seen danger, aye, and courted it all my life, and until that moment I doubt if I had known what fear was. But I knew then: the blind, unreasoning fear that saps the strength of mind and limb and melts the heart and paralyses all thought save that one overpowering instinct to fly—somewhere. Yet, in face of Travers's eagerness, I could not bear to show the white feather. I turned my back therefore on the dark cavern, now just ahead of us, and endeavoured to temporise.

"Travers," I said, "did you ever see such queer stones? How do you suppose they have got here? They are quite a different nature from these cliffs, so they could not have fallen from the sides."

"Oh, bother the stones!" said Travers. "I can't look at them now, I want to get into the cave. Quick, before it gets dark!" and as I still hesitated, he pushed past me into a more open space beyond, almost at the cavern's mouth. I did not dare to leave him, and was scrambling after him as best I might, when I suddenly heard him cry out in a voice such as I had never heard before, and hope never to again. A shrill, high-pitched cry in which there were surprise, wonder, disgust, alarm, and awful horror all combined in one: a cry of astonishment, a shriek of agony, a shout of dismay. "Look, Brander! look! look!"

"I could have sworn that when he spoke my companion was in full view, close beside me, touching me almost, though at the exact moment my eyes were looking from him; but when I turned my head in answer to his cry he was gone.

"For one second only had my gaze been averted, but in that time he had utterly vanished from sight, disappeared in a flash, gone—whither? A large black stone stood close beside me, similar to the rest in that ghostly valley; yet it struck me somehow that I had not noticed it there before. I placed my hand upon it as I peered round behind to see if Travers were there and a shudder I could not explain ran up my arm, for the stone felt warm to the touch. I had not time then to analyse my unreasonable horror at this trivial circumstance; I was too

eager to find my friend. I rushed madly among the stones, I yelled his name again and again, but the weird echoes of my cry, returned in countless reflections from cliff and cavern, alone answered me.

"In a frenzy of despair I continued my search, for certain was I that by no natural means could Travers have disappeared so utterly in so brief a space. Blind panic seized me, and I knew not what I did, till my eye suddenly fell on a shallow pool of water collected in a rocky hollow at my very feet. It was not more than a couple of inches deep, and scarce a yard across, but on its placid face were reflected the overhanging rock and opening of the cavern just behind it, and also something else that glued my eyes to it in horror and rooted my flying feet to the ground.

"Just above the cavern's mouth was a narrow ledge of rock, running horizontally, and of a few inches in width. On this natural shelf, reflected in the water, I saw, hanging downwards, a decayed fragment of goat-skin, rotten with age, but which might have been bound round something, long years before. Upon this, as if escaped from its folds, rested a Head.

"It was a human head, severed at the neck, but fresh and unfaded as if but newly dead. It bore the features of a woman—of a woman of more perfect loveliness than was ever told of in tale, or sculptured in marble, or painted on canvas. Every feature, every line was of the truest beauty, cast in the noblest mould—the face of a goddess. But upon that perfect countenance was the mark of eternal pain, of deathless agony and suffering past words. The forehead was lined and knit, the death-white lips were tightly pressed in speechless torment; in the wide eyes seemed yet to lurk the flame of an unquenchable fire; while around the fair brows, in place of hair, curled and coiled the stark bodies of venomous serpents, stiff in death, but their loathsome forms still erect, their evil heads yet thrust forward as if to strike.

"My heart ceased beating, and the chill of death crept over my limbs, as with eyes starting from their sockets I stared at that awful head, reflected in the pool. For hours it seemed to me I gazed fascinated, as the bird by the eye of the snake that has charmed it. I was as incapable of thought as movement, till suddenly forgotten school-room learning began to cross my brain, and I knew that I looked at the reflection of Medusa, the Gorgon, fairest and foulest of living things, the unclean creature, half woman, half eagle, slain by the hero Perseus, and one glimpse of whose tortured face turned the luckless beholder into stone with the horror of it.

"If I once raised my eyes from the reflection to the actual head above I knew that I too should freeze in a moment into another black block, even as poor Travers, and every other who had entered

the accursed valley, had done before. And as this thought occurred to me, the longing to lift my eyes and look upon the real object became so overpowering that, in sheer self-preservation, I inclined my face closer and closer to the water till I seemed almost to touch it, when my senses fled and I knew no more.

"When I woke at last it was far on in the night, and a bright moon, riding high, shone full down upon the valley, revealing the ragged rocks and scattered stones with a cold brilliance that almost equalled the day. I was lying chilled and stiff beside the pool, and I started up in amazement, unable to recall to my mind, for a moment, where I was or what I was doing there. I had my back to the cavern, fortunately, and as I gazed over the ghostly and deserted scene the events of the day suddenly returned to my mind in a single flash of terror.

"To escape from this ghastly place was now my only thought, and in order to do this I resolved to look no more at the pool at my feet in case the terrible fascination should again take possession of me. What it cost me to adhere to this resolution I cannot tell you, but with the courage of despair I pressed blindly forward to the mouth of the ravine, only pausing a second to lay my hand upon the now ice-cold stone that once was Travers.

"Poor Travers! gay, light-hearted fellow! Ever in the forefront of mischief, of danger, of adventure. How eager he had been to solve the secret of the haunted valley, which now must be his tomb for ever. How full of health and spirits he had scrambled a few hours before among those very boulders, one of which now, standing stiffly erect among its forest of brethren, was at once the monument and sole relic of a fearless lad, a cheery friend, and a gallant seaman. Dear old Travers! Brave, foolish boy! My heart was heavy, indeed, for his awful fate, as I reverently touched the stone and murmured to the night breeze, stealing around the rocks, 'Good-bye, old fellow; sleep sound!'

"It seemed to me, in my loneliness and terror, that my fearsome journey would never be ended: that, lost in a labyrinth, I should tread that valley for ever. But at last, after endless ages, I reached the mouth of the ravine, and once on open ground I stretched my cramped limbs and ran, without ceasing, till I once more reached the ship."

Here the captain paused, more from want of breath than anything else, I think.

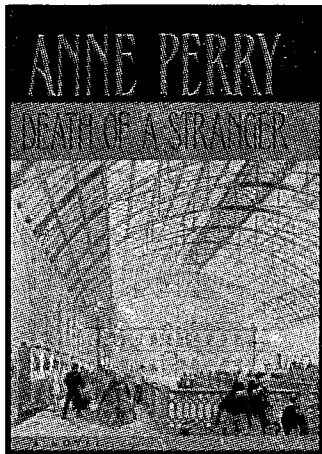
"Go on, Captain Brander," I cried. "You haven't half finished yet. What did they say when you returned, and how did you explain about poor Travers?"

"Young lady," said Captain Brander, "don't ask any more questions. I think I have told you enough for one afternoon," and here, an officer coming up and summoning him, he left me.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon

**I**n **Death of a Stranger** (Ballantine, \$25.95), Anne Perry provides William Monk, her Victorian private detective, with a client who suspects that her fiancé, a young railway-firm businessman, is somehow involved in fraud. Monk thinks it can be no coincidence that the fiancé is a partner to a man whose father, the head of the firm, was recently found dead in a brothel. As fans of this series know, Monk is an intelligent, dogged investigator, and he respects his client's need to determine her beloved's character before she weds. Fans will



also remember that a carriage accident robbed Monk of his memory—all of it—which resulted in him leaving his old job at Scotland Yard to set up a private practice. Meanwhile, his wife Hester's work with prostitutes at a free clinic turns up some helpful clues related to the tycoon's death. But it is the flashbacks Monk starts having that turn his blood cold, as bits of remembered places and information begin to lead Monk to suspect that, like his client's fiancé, he himself might have been involved in railway fraud—a fraud that led to a horrible train accident that killed dozens of schoolchildren on holiday. As Monk agonizes over past deeds he cannot remember, he learns a truth that he never suspected. For sheer storytelling, you can never do better than Anne Perry. Rich in characters, period detail, and surprising plot twists, her latest proves that this author is yet at her most skillful.

Kate Wilhelm's **Skeletons** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95) also has an engaging protagonist at its heart. Lee Donne is gifted with an eidetic memory, which means that she can see something once and retain the visual image of it—in every detail—forever. This may sound grand, but it hasn't helped Lee much. At twenty-something, she's attended college for four years only to have completed coursework in several different majors and have no degree to show for it. A job house-sitting her grandfather's isolated Oregon home for the next six months seems serendipitous—until it becomes clear that someone is stalking her. The stalker's complex motivations lead Lee to undertake an odyssey to New Orleans to uncover a long ago crime. Wilhelm, who

is also adept at fantasy and science fiction, has crafted an old-fashioned suspense novel with marvelously gothic elements. There's a grand old house, a hidden room, a tentative romance, and an awful family secret. There's also an inside look into how a major newspaper conducts a deep-background investigation.

Marianne MacDonald's heroine in **Blood Lies** (St. Martin's Minotaur \$23.95) is Dido Hoare, a North London dealer of antiquarian books who's off to Somerset for a holiday with her old friend Lizzy. The trip soon promises to be less than restful. Lizzy has just learned that she has a brother-in-law, a man soon to be released from prison where he's been serving a sentence for murdering a local woman at the nearby family manse. Then there are the senile ramblings of Lizzy's father-in-law, the mystery of the missing heirloom copy of *Alice in Wonderland*, and the unearthing of a long-buried corpse, which turns out to be the woman Lizzy's kin has already served time for murdering. Aided by a sharp local crone and Dido's retired scholar father, she sorts it all out in the end. I wanted book-collecting lore, but Dido and company make pleasant companions in this English village whodunit.

In her debut mystery **Crooked Heart** (Bantam, \$23.95), Cristina Sumners creates a cozy village milieu in the fictional New Jersey town of Harton, an idyllic place dominated by an ivy-covered university and a revered Episcopalian seminary. Here a paunchy, unhappily-married, middle-aged sheriff named Tom Holder and a beautiful, young and feisty minister named Kathryn Koerney team up to get at the heart of a mystery. A missing woman, a bedridden child, blood on a kitchen floor, betrayed trust, and the misapprehensions of illicit lovers are all grist to this unlikely sleuthing duo's mill. Equally compelling, however, is the growing (and naturally forbidden) attraction between the two detectives, truly a marriage of true minds. Yet her characters' pitiless self-honesty and self-deprecating wit spare them—and their story—from sappiness. Here's an example: "It was the frequently expressed opinion of the Rev. Dr. Kathryn Koerney that committee meetings were among the prime works of the Devil. She based this assertion on the ancient and orthodox doctrine that the Devil's chief mission is not (as is popularly believed) to make people wicked, but to make people miserable. On that criterion alone, she maintained, committees ranked right up there with income taxes and Pledge Week on PBS." See what I mean? Sumners' publisher is hoping this debut will appeal to fans of Jan Karon's Mitford tales; the comparison is fair.

Ellen Hart continues her Jane Lawless series with **Immaculate Midnight** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95), a twisty tale of misplaced trust that sets the Minneapolis restaurateur and her loved ones directly in the eye of a deadly storm. It all starts when Jane's father, a respected defense attorney, loses both a case and a client (the accused

*(continued on page 143)*

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## ON A RAIL by Aaron B. Larson

# INDEX

VOLUME FORTY-SEVEN



- |   |             |  |             |
|---|-------------|--|-------------|
| <b>Alexander, Gary</b><br>Georgi Porgie                             | Feb 46      | <b>Crenshaw, William B.</b><br>Remembering Cathleen Jordan<br>(Editor's Notes) | Jul/Aug 5   |
| <b>Allyn, Doug</b><br>The Jukebox King                              | Jun 6       | The Scrivener's Tale   | Jul/Aug 8   |
| <b>Bacon, Gertrude</b><br>The Gorgon's Head                         | Dec 127     | <b>Cutter, Charles</b><br>Sticks on the Prowl                                  | Nov 24      |
| <b>Ball, Stuart R.</b><br>Stalkers                                  | Jul/Aug 173 | <b>D'Aigle, Charlotte</b><br>The Fried Crab Affair                             | Sep 6       |
| Copperhead Jack<br>Meets the Witness                                | Oct 61      | <b>Dadmun, Bentley</b><br>Sisters  | Apr 66      |
| <b>Berdine, Tom</b><br>The Horse Principle                          | Jun 66      | <b>DeJesus, Edmund X.</b><br>Troublemaker                                      | May 26      |
| <b>Biggle, Jr., Lloyd</b><br>The Case of the Wolf<br>with Two Tales | Apr 15      | <b>Deverell, Diana</b><br>Hokey Pokey Bucuresti                                | Mar 51      |
| The Case of the<br>Fractured Puzzle                                 | Sep 62      | Boot Scoot   | Oct 6       |
| <b>Black, Terry</b><br>The Black Damp                               | Jul/Aug 133 | <b>Dirckx, John H.</b><br>Tool and Die   | Jan 96      |
| <b>Blanche, August</b><br>Lars Blom and His<br>Disappearing Gun     | Sep 128     | Flashpoint   | May 6       |
| <b>Braly, David</b><br>The Cowbell                                  | Oct 68      | Tradesman's Exit   | Jul/Aug 100 |
| <b>Chan, C. M.</b><br>The Body in the Boot                          | May 60      | <b>DuBois, Brendan</b><br>An Empire's Reach                                    | Nov 116     |
| <b>Chesterton, G. K.</b><br>Pond the Pantaloon                      | Jan 123     | <b>Dunsany, Lord</b><br>The Exiles' Club                                       | June 135    |
| <b>Cohen, Herbert</b><br>Photoplay                                  | May 30      | <b>Eister, Craig V.</b><br>What the Chairman Says                              | Jul/Aug 194 |
| <b>Coward, Mat</b><br>Too Subtle for Me                             | June 101    | <b>Finch, Doc</b><br>Hot Watts   | June 23     |
|   |             | <b>Fisher, Eve</b><br>At the End of the Path                                   | Jul/Aug 92  |
|   |             | Nude with Snow Geese   | Dec 114     |
|   |             | <b>Floyd, John M.</b><br>Battleground  | Apr 111     |



<b>Forbes, DeLoris Stanton</b> The Painted Lady	Mar 20	<b>Helgerson, Joe</b> The Case of the Floating Pearl Buyer	June 36
<b>Franklin, S. L.</b> The No-Brainer	Apr 28	<b>Hitchcock, Geoffrey</b> Passing Feet	Oct 100
<b>French, John L.</b> What Goes Around	Jul/Aug 121	<b>Hockensmith, Steve</b> Minor League	Jul/Aug 80
<b>Gates, David Edgerley</b> The Devil You Know Medicine Water	Apr 6 Sep 24	<b>Ingraham, Jim</b> Redemption	Mar 32
<b>Gilman, Dorothy</b> The Stalker	Jan 54	<b>Kantner, Rob</b> Speed Up the Ducks	Nov 6
<b>Glaspell, Susan</b> The Plea	Oct 131	<b>Knowlden, Michelle</b> The Faultless Painter	Apr 100
<b>Gordon, Arthur</b> The Spell	Mar 136	<b>Lawrence, Cynthia</b> The Cat and Mouse Caper	Jul/Aug 44
<b>Goulart, Ron</b> Easter Egg Hunt	May 102	<b>Lawton, R. T.</b> The Bond that Keeps The Bond Market	May 113 Dec 100
<b>Gray, Sherrard</b> Grandma Moses Lives Brer Foxx Rides Again	Mar 66 Oct 105	<b>Limón, Martin</b> The Mysterious Mr. Kim	Apr 54
<b>Hale, Edward Everett</b> The Man Without a Country	Apr 120	<b>Lowe, William T.</b> A Very Special Group Love Our Lake	Jul/Aug 184 Dec 120
<b>Hallstead, William F.</b> Red on Yellow, Deadly Fellow Fallout	Feb 34 Sep 49	<b>McClintick, Malcolm</b> Kelso's Ghost	Sep 91
<b>Harford, David K.</b> The Day the Cat Got Out, The Ducks Got in, and the Dog Died	Feb 76	<b>McGuire, D. A.</b> The Swimmers' Club Death Kid	Jul/Aug 141 Nov 33
<b>Hathaway, Robin</b> The Doctor Murders a Dead Man	Jan 40	<b>MacRae, Molly</b> It Takes Two	Feb 114
<b>Healy, Jeremiah</b> The Holiday Fairy Blood Brothers	Jan 6 Mar 6	<b>Mambretti, Catherine</b> Painter of the Seven-Eyed Beast	Nov 98

- |   |                               |   |                  |
|---|-------------------------------|---|------------------|
| <b>Maugham, W. Somerset</b><br>The Facts of Life                          | May 123                       | <b>Slesar, Henry</b><br>A Mother's Kiss                           | June 62          |
| <b>Moulton, M. K.</b><br>Knowing Who You<br>Might Have Been               | Mar 114                       | <b>Somasundrum, Mithran</b><br>Four Days in April                 | Oct 20           |
| <b>Nevins, Francis M.</b><br>Mr. Tutt and Mr. Train<br>(Guest Editorial)  | Feb 4                         | <b>Sproul, Dan A.</b><br>Daily Double Cross                       | Mar 124          |
| <b>Oates, Joyce Carol</b><br>The Twins: A Mystery                         | Dec 28                        | <b>Steiber, Raymond</b><br>Lighthouse Rock                        | Jul/Aug 204      |
| <b>O'Toole, S. K.</b><br>No Disclosure                                    | May 53                        | <b>Stevens, B. K.</b><br>True Colors<br>Death of the Guilty Party | Feb 6<br>Oct 30  |
| <b>Orczy, Baroness</b><br>The Dublin Mystery                              | Nov 127                       | <b>Stodghill, Dick</b><br>Mayhem on Market Street<br>Switchback   | Mar 94<br>Nov 68 |
| <b>Owens, Mike</b><br>The Alley   | Feb 100                       | <b>Strong, Marianne Wilski</b><br>The Lyre's Song                 | Jul/Aug 215      |
| <b>Parker, I. J.</b><br>Death and Cherry Blossoms                         | June 114                      | <b>Train, Arthur</b><br>"And Lesser Breeds Without the Law"       | Feb 125          |
| <b>Petrin, Jas. R.</b><br>Death by Numbers<br>The Cruise<br>Fine Business | Jan 16<br>Jul/Aug 52<br>Dec 6 | <b>Tritten, Larry</b><br>It's a Wonderful Con                     | Jan 47           |
| <b>Ruark, E. B.</b><br>Ante Bellum  | Jul/Aug 63                    | <b>Weston, Anne</b><br>The Adventure of the<br>Chestnut Vendor    | Oct 77           |
| <b>Sallis, James</b><br>Ukulele and the World's Pain                      | Jul/Aug 181                   | <b>Wiecek, Mike</b><br>The Last Letter                            | Jan 86           |
| <b>Saplak, Charles</b><br>Meatloaf is Monday                              | Jan 117                       | <b>Wilson, Jr., L. A.</b><br>Jacks                                | Sep 112          |
| <b>Satterfield, Ben</b><br>Bad, Good, and No Luck                         | Dec 66                        | <b>Woodward, Ann</b><br>The Affair of the Assistants              | Feb 64           |
| <b>Schecter, I. J.</b><br>Saint Maffia and South Crampton                 | Dec 39                        |   |                  |

*(continued from page 138)*

man commits suicide in jail). Then the young man's father publicly threatens revenge against his son's attorney. So when bad things begin happening to the good people in her life, Jane soon suspects the Alto family. First she finds drugs stashed in her own office, and a report to the police reveals that a tip has already put both her and her business under a drug surveillance. Then her sister-in-law is brutally attacked in her home, and Jane's brother Peter is arrested for the crime. That is the final straw. Together with her old friend, the irrepressible diva Cordelia Thorn, Jane goes on the offensive. Certain that the answers lie in Billy Alto's past, Jane comes to believe her foe to be one of three men: Billy's angry father, his mild brother the doctor, or his charismatic best friend. The truth is both shocking and slow in coming, which heightens the suspense of an action-filled climax.

Marshall Browne's **Inspector Anders and the Ship of Fools** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95) pulls the reader into the insightful but introspective world of one of Interpol's anti-terrorist agents. Anders is still coping with the incident that gave him his reputation and wooden leg, when a terrorist group begins targeting the European business community. In spite of tight security, a glass-enclosed boardroom is blown to smithereens just as the directors consolidate a merger. The radical group threatens more violence until the corporations desist from closing deals that will lay off large numbers of workers. Although there's action galore, Anders's personality and his existential take on life isolate him from his colleagues. His unusual viewpoint also gives him an uncanny insight into the crimes, and ultimately puts him and a friend at great personal risk. Browne offers American readers a new perspective on an increasingly centralized Europe as well as an intimate look inside a unique character's heart and mind.

Michael Dibdin, too, takes readers to Europe in his latest Aurelio Zen novel, **And Then You Die** (Pantheon, \$21). Zen is a seasoned investigator for Rome's Criminalpol, but he's keeping a very low profile these days. Like Anders, Zen is also recovering from wounds received in the line of duty. More than that, he's scheduled to testify against a Mafia leader, so he's been shunted into the Italian version of a witness protection program. It should be a sweet deal: he's been ordered to relax in a seaside apartment that comes with a reserved chair on a very select private beach several blocks away. All too soon, however, people seem to be dropping dead around Zen, including the poor fellow who happened to be in Zen's assigned beach chaise one morning. Add a beautiful woman, a borrowed boat, a dash of departmental politics, and an awkward corpse on the couple's hands, and you have the latest adventure in the life of this clever detective. Spending time with Zen is always a pleasure, even when his life takes on such a radically different turn.

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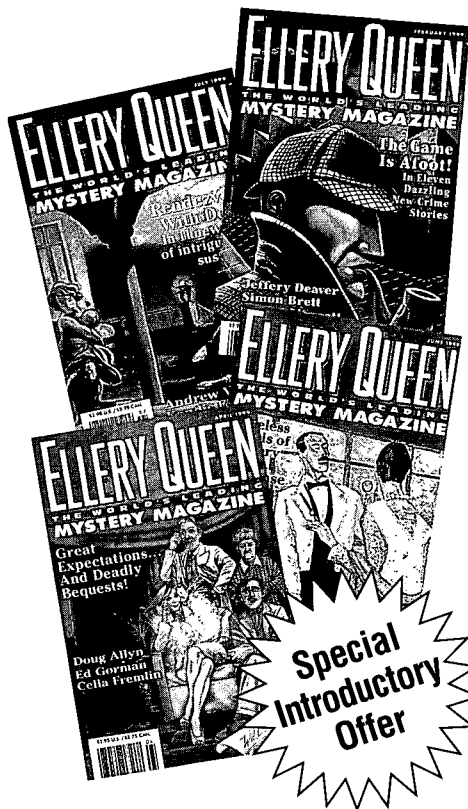
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